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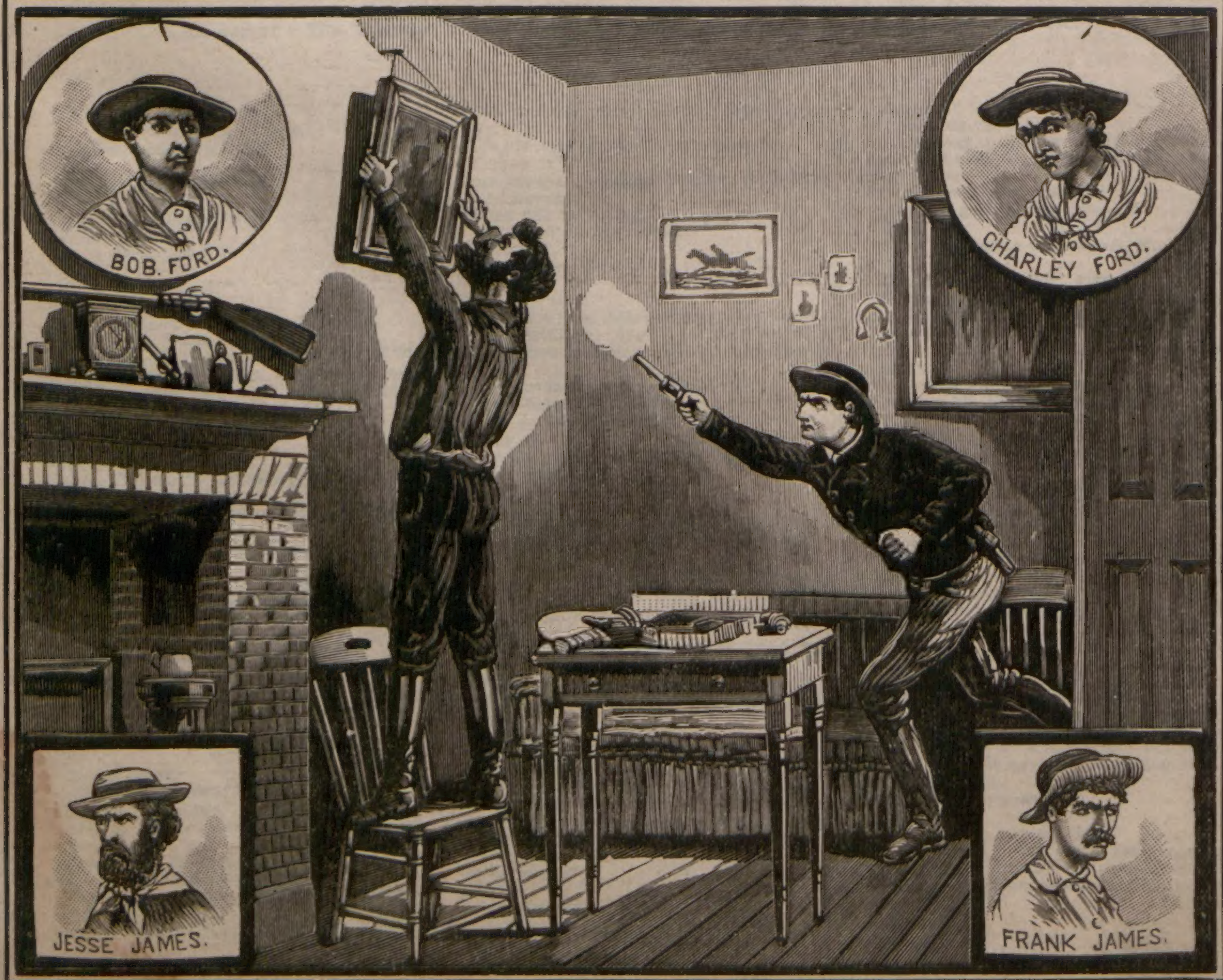
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THE FORD BOYS' VENGEANCE:

OR,

FROM BANDITS TO DETECTIVES.

By D. W. STEVENS.



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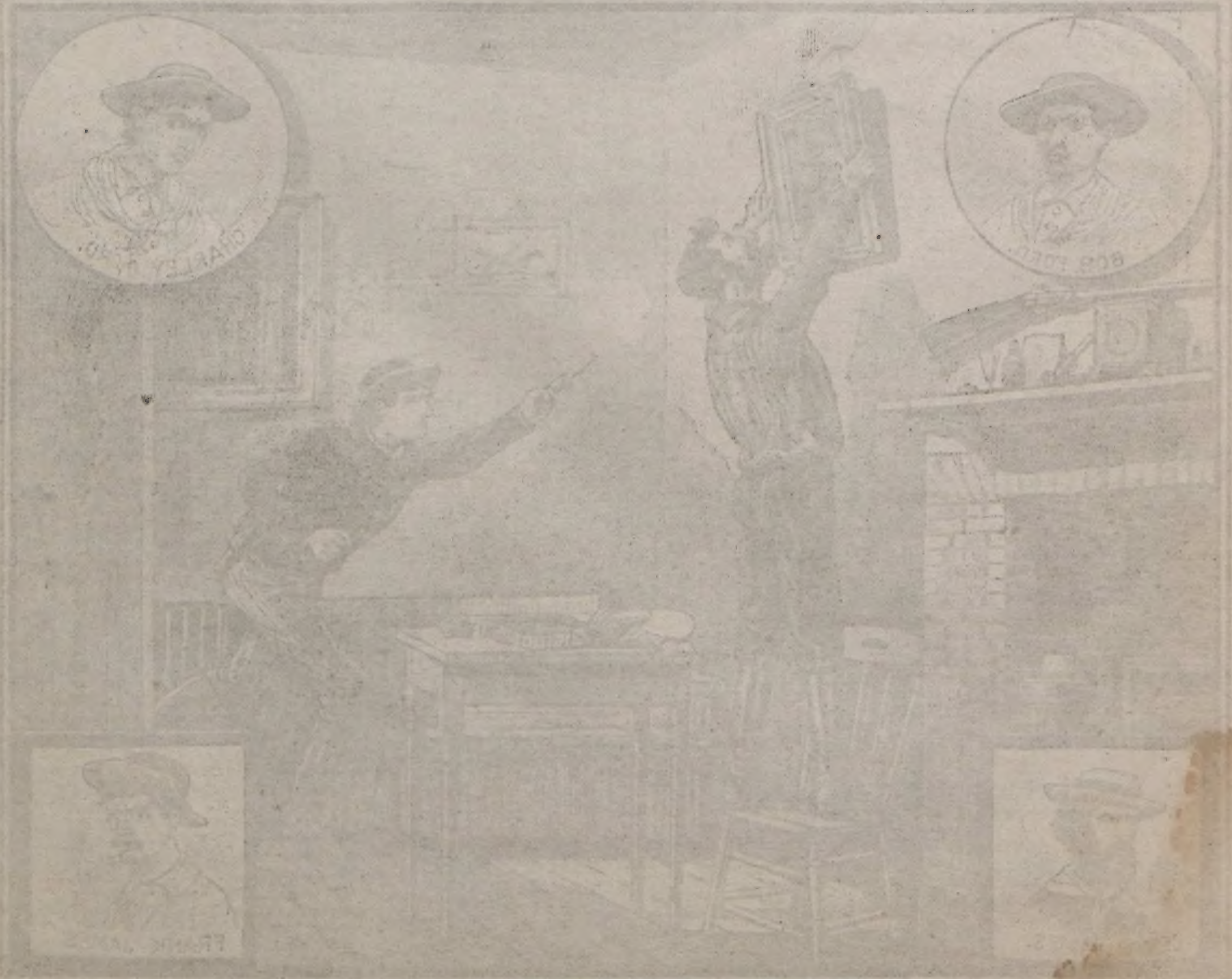
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THE FORD BOYS' VENGEANCE;

OR,

From Bandits to Detectives.

By D. W. STEVENS,

Author of "The Younger Boys' Flight; or, Chased From the Lakes to the Gulf," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

ENTICED FROM HOME.

"ARE you wounded, Jesse?"

"No."

"Did the bullet strike you?"

"No."

"Why do you lag behind?"

"Siroc's lame."

"What, Siroc lame?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he was hit."

"I am afraid so."

"I see he limps."

"Very badly, Frank."

At this moment wild yells arose on the air behind the two horsemen, who, dust-covered and haggard from their long flight, were galloping up a dusty road.

"Do you hear that, Jesse?"

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

The fugitive cast a despairing glance about over the landscape.

The sun beamed down its quivering heat upon the scene.

"You know what it means, Frank!" said Jesse.

"Yes."

"Unless Siroc can overcome that lameness, I am doomed."

Frank glanced at the sun.

"It's several hours until dark," he said.

"Yes."

"The day is very hot."

"I never saw a warmer."

"Nor I."

"They are not much over a mile in our rear."

"Go on, Frank."

"What are you going to do?"

"See what ails Siroc."

"Are you going to dismount?"

"Yes."

"There, they see you dismounting, and what a howl of rage the fiends set up!"

"Poor Siroc! Noble fellow, where are you hurt?"

Siroc rubbed his head against his master's shoulder.

"Can you see where he is hit, Jesse?"

"No."

"It's his right fore foot that is lame."

"I know it."

Jesse James then passed his hand gently down his right fore leg.

"I can find no wound."

"Perhaps it's in his shoulder."

"I will look."

"Do you see it?"

"No."

"Then his foot?"

Again yells from their pursuers were heard.

"We've got 'em! We've got 'em!" roared a score of armed horsemen who were crowding in their rear.

"How far are they away, Frank?"

"Three-fourths of a mile."

"How do they approach?"

"They are wary."

"I would suppose so after the lesson we gave them this morning."

"Yes."

"We left a few?"

"Half a dozen, I would say, at least."

"Lee's Ford will long be remembered."

"And me too."

Jesse now lifted the right fore foot of Siroc as coolly and carefully as if there was not a foe within a thousand miles, and he had all the day to do the work in.

"I see nothing wrong with his foot," said Jesse.

"There is," Frank repeated. "Siroc is a thoroughbred horse and he does not limp from a strain."

"He has had a long run."

"Yes, dig the dirt out of his hoof."

Jesse James coolly took a knife from his pocket and proceeded to dig the dirt from his hoof. In a few moments he had taken it all out and revealed a small sharp-cornered stone sticking in the frog of the foot.

"I have found it."

"The wound?"

"Yes."

"Was it a bullet?"

"No."

"What?"

"A stone."

"Can't you get it out?"

"I am going to make a tremendous trial."

Jesse then coolly dug the stone out from the horse's foot.

Wild yells came on the air.

"Are they getting close, Frank?"

"Yes."

"They don't come up in a hurry?"

"No."

"Bang!" came a distant shot.

The report was sharp and heavy indicating that it was a large gun which had been fired.

The ball plunged through the broad brim of Frank's hat, slitting a bit out and whipping him on the cheek.

Frank drew his hand up to his face.

"Are you hit, Frank?" asked Jesse.

"No."

"But they are getting close."

"Yes, and got long range guns."

Bang!

Another heavy report shook the air and the bullet came hurling toward Jesse striking up the earth almost at his feet.

"There, Siroc, old boy, you are all right now."

Jesse put his boot in the stirrup and vaulted in the saddle.

"Away we go, Frank."

"Is he lame, asked Frank?"

"No."

Crack!

Crack!

"They are shooting to kill, Jesse."

"Yes, and woe to them if they come within range of our revolvers. Blue Cut and Lee's Ford are nothing compared to what the result will be if they do come in range of our pistols."

The James Boys were now galloping like the wind over the hill.

"Is Siroc lame now?"

"No."

"Then we can distance them."

"Yes—although our horses have been going under whip and spur almost since dawn of day our pursuers have not a horse among them who can overtake us."

"No."

"See, they fall behind."

Far in their rear could be seen a dozen horsemen who were whipping their horses to their utmost to overtake them.

Suddenly half a score of small puffs of white smoke arose from the advancing pursuers, and a second later the balls began knocking up the dust in little spurts but a short distance to the rear of our fugitives.

Jesse James turned in his saddle and laughing said:

"Poor marksmen—poor guns."

"And poor horses."

"Yes, though they have changed a dozen times in this chase, and we rode the same horses we started in with we are still in advance."

"Where are you going, Jess?"

"To Clay County."

"Why not to Kearney?"

"Idiot! There is a telegraph station there," growled Jesse. "We don't want to go near Kearney."

"Right you are we don't."

They then pressed on, and were soon lost to the sight of their pursuers.

Shortly after dark two horsemen drew rein at the home of Mr. Snapper.

"Hello, Roderick!" cried one to the farmer, who in his shirt sleeves was walking in the yard.

The day had been an exceedingly hot one, and the farmer was out to get a breath of the cool evening air.

"Who are you?" asked the man in the shirt sleeves.

"Come and see."

He came cautiously to the gate.

It was so dark he could not distinctly see the features of the men.

Reaching the gate he gazed on the dust-covered travelers and cried:

"Why, bless me if it ain't—"

"There, Roderick, never mind, now, what you were going to say."

"I won't say it, but I know ye, boys. Git down."

"Are you alone?"

"No. The two boys are here."

"The Ford Boys?"

"Yes."

"The very fellows we want to see, Frank."

"Yes."

"Do they suspect Roderick?"

"No."

"Good."

"Believe ye kin git 'em."

"Good."

"Goin' ter stay all night?"

"Of course."

"Been runnin' them horses, ain't ye?"

"Well, one would suppose we had, to judge by the way they have been sweating."

"Who war it?"

"What do you mean, Rod?"

"Who war it arter ye?"

"Timberlake."

"Whar'd ye leave him?"

"He is twenty miles away on the other side of the Little Blue."

"Is he?"

"Yes."

"Don't think he'll come on yer ter-night?"

"No. But Rod?"

"Wall."

"We want some grub."

"And horses fed."

"Yes. Show us your barn and feed; we always do that."

The James Boys nearly always made it a rule to superintend the feeding and currying and rubbing down their own horses. Their lives so often depended on the speed and endurance of their animals that they could not afford to slight them, or intrust the work to others.

"I'll show you the barn, an' then go in ther house an' git ther old woman to set ther table."

When he had shown them the barn, and the James Boys had removed their saddles from the hot, smoking backs of the hard ridden horses, Snapper turned to go in the house.

"Rod," called Jesse.

"Yes."

He turned about and went to Jesse's side.

"Send one out to help us."

"One o' ther Fords?"

"Yes, we want ter talk with him."

"Blamed good idea, boys; which'll I send?"

"The youngest, he is perhaps the most susceptible."

"I'll do it."

Then Jesse and Frank proceeded to rub and curry their horses until their hair became dry.

"I am quite certain that we will win them," said Jesse.

"I hope so."

"We need recruits."

"Very badly."

"These two young fellows can just help us out in the Muncie matter."

"Yes."

"That was a terrible loss, Frank."

"Which?"

"The Northfield affair."

"Yes it was."

"There was Bill Chadwell."

"Fine old Bill, a braver horse thief never rode on a dark night."

"And Clell Miller."

"Grand Old Clell, he was never surpassed."

"Both shot down like dogs in the street."

"Yes—I believe we ought to take vengeance on Northfield."

"How?"

"Burn the old town to ashes."

"Yes, but can we."

"Go some night."

"But I have had quite enough of Northfield and Minnesota too for that matter; henceforth I prefer to remain in a more congenial clime, even if my operations are limited."

"But I want vengeance."

"Whist!"

Footsteps were heard without.

Jesse James readily supposed that the person approaching was none other than the boy, but not being quite certain of it took a step toward the door.

"Yes, it's Bob Ford."

"Mr. Snapper said you wanted help," said a young man entering, holding a lighted lantern in his hand.

"Well, yes, we do."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Bob.

"Hold the lantern."

"Oh, I know you now."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

"Mr. Jackson, the gentleman who told us to meet him here."

"I am."

"Well, you wanted to see us?"

"Of course. You are Bob Ford?" said Jesse, interrogatively, as he proceeded to rub down Siroc.

"Yes."

"And your brother is Charley?"

"Yes."

"You are brave boys."

Bob Ford, who was not over sixteen years of age at this time, blushed slightly under the praise.

"Well, I don't think we are cowards," he said.

"I know you are not."

"Thank you."

"Don't you love good horses?"

"Yes."

"And wild adventures?"

"You bet."

"With plenty of money?"

"Yes—ha, ha, ha, with plenty of money," cried Bob Ford.

"How would you like to engage in business?"

"What kind?"

"A business that pays."

"Very well."

"You are not going to school now?"

"No, sir—there is no school."

"And your school master?"

"We hate him."

"Why?"

"He flogged me two years ago."

"He did?"

"Yes."

There was a bitter, malicious spirit expressed in the manner in which Bob Ford ground out the words through his teeth.

"Well, Bob—what have you done?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing?"

"No—nothing."

"You are not going to live under that are you?"

"Live under it?"

"That's what I mean. You are not going to let the matter go unavenged?"

"If I knew how I would have my revenge."

"You can."

"How?"

"Flog him."

"I'm not big enough."

"Both you could."

"Yes. I'll speak to Charley about it."

"Unless I am very much mistaken in the spirit of you two boys it will not be long until you have wiped the dishonorable stain from you."

"By jingo, we'll do it!" cried Bob. "I intended to wait until I was a man grown."

"There is no need to do that," said Jesse.

"Do you think not?"

"I do. Do the work of vengeance now. Then come with us for a few weeks until it blows over."

"But where will you go?"

"To Kentucky."

"We've got no money."

"We'll pay all your expenses," said Jesse. "Besides, as we are going horseback, there won't be much expenses to pay."

"We've got no horses."

"Well, we'll furnish horses."

A wild plan of securing the Ford Boys to join his band without a single doubt in the matter.

"There, Frank, that will do," said Jesse.

"You have fine horses, Mr. Jackson," said Bob.

"Yes, he can't be beat."

"Do you like good horses?" Frank James asked.

"Yes, I do."

"You shall have a good horse."

"As good as that?"

"If as good a one can be found," said Jesse.

"Well, that is fine."

"Don't you think you would like to go into business with us now?"

"If I knew the business."

"It's a good business."

"Does it pay?"

"Yes."

"Equal to a bank?"

"Sometimes better."

"Well, I'll talk to Charley."

"And the schoolmaster?"

"We'll flay him."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"As soon as we can."

"How far does he live from here?"

Bob Ford seemed for a moment to be lost in an effort to make a calculation.

"Guess it's twenty miles."

"Do it to-morrow night," said Jesse.

"We can't."

"Why?"

"How could we?"

"Go to his house and call him out."

"But we haven't got horses."

"We'll furnish horses and go with you and see it done."

"Great goslings! won't he be mad?"

"Of course."

"He will have us arrested."

"No, he won't. He need not know who you are."

"How can he not know who we are?"

"Put masks on your faces."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Bob Ford, "that's the very thing to do."

"Of course it's the very thing to do."

"We'll do it."

"And we'll go with you," said Jesse, as they went to the house.

While Bob Ford was laying his plan of vengeance before his brother, Jesse and Frank James were holding a private conversation to themselves.

"We have as good as got two recruits without their knowing it, Frank," said Jesse.

"Yes."

"The young fool don't know that we will put them on a pair of horses stolen right from the neighborhood where they propose to perpetrate the outrage."

"Yes. The plan will work. It will be a go," said Frank.

"You are right, it will."

"Then we will have two young valuable recruits."

"We will."

Having enticed the Ford Boys from their homes, the James Boys determined not to let go their grasp of them until they had them thoroughly in their power.

"If Timberlake or some of Pinkerton's meddling detectives don't come to meddle with us," said Jesse, "we'll have them in forty-eight hours."

CHAPTER II.

BANDITS WITHOUT KNOWING IT.

Jesse and Frank James slept and watched by turns that night.

Next morning Theodrick Snapper was early astir.

On pretense of hunting some stray cows he mounted his Clay-bank mare and rode a mile in the direction from whence the approach of Sheriff Timberlake was expected. But there was no sign of an enemy, and Snapper came back to assure his guests that all was right.

"How about the boys, Jess?"
 "We'll get them."
 "What's yer plan?"
 Jesse James then coolly laid before him his diabolical plot.
 "That's a good plan, Jess."
 "Do you think it will work?"
 "Course it will."
 "I thought it would."
 "Wish I war foot loose, I'd go with yer. But I fit three years through the war with ye, Jess, and I've got a piece o' Yankee lead in my leg which kinder bothers me a leetle mite."
 "You can be more service here, Bob. Stand always ready to help the boys and don't be afraid of their forgetting you."
 Jesse and Frank then got ready for their plan. Jesse called Bob aside and said:
 "Bob, you haven't forgotten our talk last night?"
 "No."
 "Haven't given it up?"
 "Not if we can do it."
 "You can."
 "You will help us?"
 "Yes. I am going now to get your horses."
 "Are you?"
 "Yes, we both go. So you and Charlie be ready to ride at midnight."
 It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Jesse and Frank James set out on their horses down the road toward a rich horse-raiser named Levi Nichols.
 Old Levi Nichols was a rich farmer, who had always prided himself on the excellency of his horses.
 The James Boys knew that he had many blooded animals, and that he would visit his vengeance on the head of any one who would dare take one.
 "Jess, you've got a level head," said Frank.
 "Why?"
 "Nobody else would ever have thought of this plan."
 "Stealing the horses?"
 "Yes, and mounting the Fords on them."
 "Ha, ha! we'll have the officers after us."
 "Of course."
 "And they will see Bob and Charley Ford riding the horses."
 "Yes."
 "Then they will say they are guilty of stealing."
 "It's an excellent plan."
 "It did work, as we shall see."
 At the hour agreed upon Frank and Jesse James with two extra saddle horses waited for Bob and Charley Ford.
 "Now we go to vengeance," said Bob, as he came out of the house.
 "And to glory," put in Frank James.
 "Vengeance is glory enough for me."
 "Later in life you will come to want a little glory."
 "Yes, I suppose so."
 They had not gone far before Jesse and Bob, who were in front, came to a halt.
 "What's the matter?" Frank James asked, laying a hand on his revolver.
 "Some one is coming."
 "Yes."
 "Don't you hear the horses' feet?"
 "I do."
 "What can it mean?" asked Bob Ford.
 Bob was entirely ignorant of the fact that he was playing a part of a criminal.
 "We don't know," said Jesse, evasively.
 "Let's turn aside," suggested Frank.
 Jesse had half drawn his revolver, but shoved it back and said:
 "This way, Bob."
 "Aye, aye, sir."
 "Can you ride a hurdle race?"
 "I can ride anything."
 "I am going to try leaping that hedge."
 "Great guns!"
 "Can you?"
 "If the horse can."
 "He can; hold a tight rein and lift him clear."
 "Yes."
 "Now give him the spur and here we go."
 The four horsemen, with Jesse James and Bob Ford in front, dashed like the wind at the hedge. Jesse James knew full well what Siroc could do, and was not disappointed.
 He was a good judge of horse flesh and he believed that the animal Bob rode would do as well.
 In this he was not disappointed.
 Bob's horse cleared the hedge with Siroc.
 Next came Frank James mounted on his famous bay Jim Malone.
 Jim Malone, like Siroc, was a thoroughbred Arabian, and cleared the hedge at a bound.

After all came Charley.
 His horse went over, but did not catch himself so well as did the other horses on alighting. The horse stumbled and a less experienced rider than Charley would have been unseated.
 Charley brought him to his feet and the little cavalcade became quiet.
 Jesse and Frank listened.
 Two horsemen galloped down the big road only a few rods away.
 The trees and bushes which grew between the hedge and road screened them from view.
 "Come on, come on," cried one voice.
 "Yes—I am, as fast as my horse kin go."
 "I'll have the sheriff after those horse thieves before daylight."
 The James Boys smiled, but it was too dark for their younger companions to note their smiles.
 "Did you recognize that man, Bob?" Jesse asked.
 "Yes."
 "Who is he?"
 "Mr. Levi Nichols."
 "Where does he live?"
 "A few miles east."
 "Wonder where he is going?"
 "To town for the sheriff."
 "I would suppose that he had lost some horses."
 "Guess he did?"
 "Wonder who stole old Levi Nichol's horses?" asked Charlie, innocently.
 "I have no idea," Bob answered.
 "Well, boys, we will go on now."
 "All right."
 They galloped across a wide meadow, and coming to a gate on the other side leaped it and went thundering down a road.
 The night was dark and cool, the horses all fresh and eager for a gallop.
 Mile after mile they flew over the road with the untiring energy of steam engines.
 It lacked some time to daylight when Bob said:
 "He lives just over the hill."
 "Who?"
 "The school-master."
 "What's his name?"
 "Mike Archer."
 "Well, Bob, you will soon be even with him."
 "Oh, I hope so."
 "We will help you if necessary."
 They galloped up the hill to the house where the school-master lived.
 Mike Archer was a small farmer as well as school-teacher. He taught school during the winter season and farmed in the summer.
 The advancing horsemen were greeted by the loud barking of dogs.
 Drawing rein Bob called:
 "Hello!"
 The dog barked.
 "Hello!"
 No answer yet.
 "Bob?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Get down and go and rap on the door."
 "Be careful, Bob, you may get a dose of buck shot," said Charley.
 "I will go with you," answered Jesse.
 Bob and Jesse dismounted and handed their bridle reins to their two companions.
 Then they went into the yard.
 The dogs came at them furiously, but Jesse drew his large dirk knife and stabbed one, sending him howling to his kennel.
 Rap, rap, rap, went Bob's riding whip on the door.
 "Who's there?" demanded a voice from within.
 "Get up, Mike."
 "Who is it?"
 "Me."
 "Who's me?"
 "Come out and you'll see."
 "Isn't that Bob Ford?"
 Bob now discovered that his voice had betrayed him.
 "Jesse?" he whispered.
 "What?"
 "This won't do."
 "Why?"
 "He knows me."
 "I will talk to him," said Jesse.
 "All right."
 "Is that you, Bob?" asked the schoolmaster.
 "No," Jesse answered.
 "Who are you?"
 "Thomas Jackson."
 "Well, what do you want?"
 "You are needed at your neighbor's over the hill."
 "What's happened?"

"It's a serious accident."
 "Yes."
 "Come quick!"
 "I will."
 The unsuspecting Archer, roused from a sound nap, and a little bewildered at this nocturnal call, half dressed himself and opened the door.
 "I will dress as soon as possible," he began.
 "No, come this way!"
 "Why?"
 "There is no time for you to dress."
 "Who is it?"
 "You will do better as you are," answered Jesse.
 He seized the man by the arm and jerked him into the yard.
 "What means this insult?" demanded Archer.
 The schoolmaster was a man of spirit.
 "Keep quiet."
 He saw before him a man with stern, terrible features, leveling a cocked revolver at his head. By the man's side stood a boy whose face was covered with a black mask.
 "What do you mean?"
 "Do you see those men at the gate?"
 "Yes."
 "Do you imagine what it means?"
 "Robbery?"
 "No."
 "What—?"
 "You are not worth robbing!"
 "What do you want?"
 "Satisfaction."
 "Satisfaction?"
 "Yes."
 "I have never done you any harm."
 "But you have harmed others."
 "How?"
 "As school-master."
 Archer now began to tremble despite himself.
 "I never did more than was my duty!" gasped the school-master.
 "Down on your knees!" commanded Jesse, sternly.
 "What?"
 "Down, I say!"
 "Oh, what do you mean?"
 "Down, or I will fire."
 The man sank on his knees.
 "Tie him."
 Bob, who was provided with cords, proceeded to tie the school-master. In a few moments he had the job completed.
 "What's the matter, what's the matter?" cried a frightened, half-dressed woman, rushing from the house.
 "Get back in the house and stay there!" cried Jesse James.
 Bang! went a pistol in the air.
 With a scream the woman ran back into the house.
 "Have you got him tied, Bob?"
 "Yes."
 "Come, get up, sir."
 "Oh, don't hang me."
 "We won't."
 "Spare my life."
 "Yes—we will."
 "What do you intend doing with me?"
 "I intend leading you out here and allowing this injured youth to take summary vengeance on you."
 "For what?"
 "Flogging him in school."
 The school-master ground his teeth in silence.
 "We will give you a taste of your own medicine."
 "He deserved it, and he knows it."
 "Come on, Frank and Charley."
 "Aye, aye!" responded Frank.
 The school-master was led through a gate and taken to a grove of woods and trees which grew at the rear of the house.
 "Here."
 "Will this do?" asked Frank.
 "Yes."
 Frank sprang from his horse.
 "Tie him there, boys."
 The school-master was tied to a tree.
 "Tear off his shirt."
 "You will pay for this outrage," said Archer.
 "You will first pay for it."
 "There, the shirt is off."
 "Bob?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Have you got your switches?"
 "Yes."
 "Lay on until you are satisfied."
 The school-master ground his teeth in silence. Swish, whack, came the switch on the bare back.
 Again and again it fell.
 "Bob, lay on harder."

Thick and fast it fell again and again on the bare shoulders of the school-master.

Mike Archer was a man of iron nerve, and he endured his punishment without a murmur.

The blood was flowing from a score of places when Bob Ford, almost exhausted, threw down the switch, and said:

"That will do."

"Well done, Bob Ford. I think he will remember you now, and be careful how he lays the rod on your back," said Jesse.

"Hush!" cried Bob.

"Why?"

"You must not speak my name."

"Oh, I had forgotten."

"Bob Ford, I know you," cried the school-master. "I know you and your brother, Charley both, and I will make you roast for this."

"No threats, sir, or we will hang you."

"Who are you?"

"Bob Ford's friend."

"You are no credit to him."

"We stand by each other, don't we, Bob?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Jesse James."

"I believe you."

"Jesse?" said Frank, a moment later, drawing his brother aside.

"What, Frank?"

"Why did you give him your name?"

"To fasten the Fords to us. We've got them now. They are outlaws without knowing it."

The school-master was released and went to the house, and the James Boys and their young recruits went five miles further to the home of a Mr. Ellison, where they halted and dismounting went to bed.

Bob and Charley Ford were in an adjoining apartment.

The James Boys did not both sleep at once, for they rather expected pursuit.

Mr. Ellison, who was a friend of theirs, kept the four horses saddled under the window ready for them to mount.

Bob and Charlie, little dreaming that they had engaged in a life of outlawry in earnest, slept the sleep of the innocent.

CHAPTER III.

A WILD CHASE.

"CHARLIE, Charlie, wake up!" cried Bob.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know."

Thump!

Thump!

Thump!

"Some one is knocking."

It seemed to the Ford Boys that they had scarcely closed their eyes.

The sun was rising, and the apartment in which they slept was quite light.

"Thump, thump, thump!" again came the fall of a fist upon the door of their room.

"Who is there?"

"It is I."

"Mr. Jackson?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter?"

"Get up! Be quick!"

"All right."

"Are you dressed?"

"Dressing."

"Get your pistols."

"Is it so serious, Mr. Jackson?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will get them."

"Open the door."

Bob made haste to open the door. Before him stood Jesse James, dressed and armed, ready to drop in the saddle.

"What is the matter?" asked Bob.

"They are coming."

"Who?"

"The sheriff."

"What for?"

"To arrest you."

"Why, what have I done?"

"Whipped the schoolmaster."

"Do they know it was me?"

"I suppose so, Bob, but you have not a second to lose."

"Where is Frank?"

"In the saddle."

Bang!

Went a shot at this moment.

A wild yell rose on the air and a volley of rifles answered the shot.

Two or three bullets passed into the window and the Ford Boys now realized that the conflict had begun.

They ran down the stairway.

"This way," said Jesse.

He lead them out at the rear.

Frank was discovered sitting on his horse at the corner of the house, aiming a pistol at some one.

Bang!

"Mount," cried Jesse.

The Ford Boys were in their saddles in a moment.

Jesse leaped on Siroc.

"Come!" he cried.

Away they went. Over the garden picket fence and up the hill.

They were now in full view of the sheriff's posse.

Old Levi Nichols, who was one of the posse, cried:

"There they go. There go my two horses that were stole last night. Bob and Charley Ford are on 'em. I allers knew them fellers were boss thieves."

Jesse James heard this information with no little exultation.

"I've got the Ford Boys now without a doubt," he thought. "They dare not desert me."

Away they flew over the meadow. Then they leaped a fence.

Bob and Charlie were well mounted.

Both were light riders and their horses soon learned to leap fences and clear ditches with all the facility of the world-renowned Siroc and Jim Malone.

Over all barriers they flew like birds, and soon distanced the main body of pursuers.

"Mr. Jackson," said Bob.

Bob Ford still believed Jesse James to be Mr. Henry Jackson, as he had represented himself.

"What, Bob?"

"Did you hear him?"

"Who?"

"Old Levi Nichols."

"Yes."

"He said these were his horses."

"So he did, but they are not."

"Whose are they?"

"Yours. You have possession."

"Yes, but are they ours?"

"Of course."

"He said they were stolen."

"Stolen or not, they are yours."

Bob heaved a sigh.

There was something dark and mysterious about it all which could not be comprehended.

"Jesse!" whispered Frank.

"Well?"

"There are three of those fellows gaining on us."

"I know it."

"What had we better do?"

"When we pass over the next hill I will halt, and you and the boys can go on."

"Well?"

"Don't let them get out of your sight."

"I won't."

"They are young and tender yet. We must harden them as soon as possible, as they may desert us."

"Yes."

"Go on."

"What is he going to do?" asked Bob.

They had passed over the hill, and Jesse James dismounted.

They were now on one of those prairie roads, and the water flowing down the hill had cut small ditches on either side of it.

Jesse James had dismounted.

"He is going to tighten his saddle girth," said Frank.

"But he has drawn his revolver!"

"That's to scare the others away."

There was a thick clump of hazel bushes at the roadside, and Jesse James went behind this.

"Lie down, Siroc—lie down."

Bob Ford, who was interested in the proceeding, still looked back as they thundered on.

"What is he going to do?"

"Fix his saddle," Frank repeated.

"But his horse is down."

"It will be all right."

"I am afraid he is going to fight."

"What if he does?"

"Some one will be killed."

"It will not be he."

"But we don't want the crime of blood, of murder, added to us. We are already accused of horse stealing, something we did not do," said Bob.

"You won't be guilty."

"No, but they'll say we are in bad company."

"Do you think you are in bad company?"

"N—no."

But the manner in which he hesitated would lead one to believe some one to think he still entertained a doubt.

"Bob?" said Frank.

All the time they were galloping at a break-neck speed over the prairie.

"What?" asked Bob.

"Don't you know that your safety depends on you staying with us?"

"I don't know."

"If you fall back or leave us you will certainly be arrested and sent to jail, then to the penitentiary."

"For whipping Mike?"

"No."

"What?"

"Stealing horses."

"We didn't steal these horses."

"You can't make a jury believe you innocent."

"No," put in Charlie. "We are in for it now, Bob, and our only hope is to stay with these men."

"Where will you take us?" asked Bob.

"Where you will be safe."

"To Kentucky?"

"Yes."

"Won't they find us there?"

"We'll go under other names."

Bob now turned in his saddle to again gaze at Jesse James.

The bandit chief was kneeling behind his horse, which lay on the ground, and had cocked his revolver.

"Come on," cried Frank.

They descended another hill, and in a moment were out of sight of Jesse.

Daring indeed must the bandit king have been to have waited alone to meet the enemy, three to one, and all desperate men.

A moment later Bob heard the sharp report of a pistol.

Again, again and again the shots rang out on the air and then all became still.

A few moments later Jesse was seen galloping after them, while afar could be discovered a riderless horse galloping over the plain.

A few moments later Jesse James joined them. His face was calm and unmoved as if nothing had happened.

Bob Ford shuddered, but said nothing. The truth began to dawn upon him.

That night the four stopped in a wild, lonely wood to camp for the night.

Frank and the Fords built a camp fire while Jesse went off to forage for provisions, which is another term for stealing or taking by force.

He had not been gone more than two hours before he returned with a ham of bacon, three chickens, a goodly quantity of bread, a jar of preserves, half a peck of potatoes and a griddle, coffee-pot, and utensils sufficient for their purpose.

No one questioned Jesse as to how he had so bountifully supplied himself.

He had also brought some oats and corn for the horses.

But then the earth was covered with rich blue grass which grew in abundance under the trees and they knew they would feast that night.

A supper was prepared which the four hungry men enjoyed.

Bob and Charlie were strangely silent.

Jesse watched them, and when they got a little apart to themselves he crept close up behind a tree where he could hear what they said to each other.

"Well, Charlie, do you know I've got strange suspicions," said Bob.

"Of who?"

"These men."

"You mean Jackson and Frank Dunn?"

"Yes."

"What do you suspect?" Charlie asked.

"They are not what they seem."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. That man is not Jackson. The man called Frank has called him Jesse several times."

There was a silence.

"Well, Bob, our fates run with theirs."

"Yes; but, Charlie, I'm sorry we whipped Mr. Archer."

"Why?"

"We are outlaws now."

"Of course."

"Well, I believe these fellows are outlaws."

"Could it be possible?"

"What be possible?"

"That they are the James Boys."

"I don't know. One is Frank and one is Jesse."

"That's the names of the James Boys."

"Yes."

"Can it be?"

"I don't know."

Then both became silent.

Jesse James crept away with a smile on his face.

It was a wicked smile and one which might be thought dangerous.

As soon as Bob and Charlie came back to the camp fire he said:

"Boys, sit down, I want to talk with you."

Bob looked up in surprise.

"About what?" he asked.

"About ourselves."

"Well, I am ready."

"There seems to be a little uncertainty in your minds as to what and who we are?"

"Yes, we don't exactly know."

"You don't believe I am Mr. Jackson, do you, Bob?"

"No."

"I am not."

"I knew it."

"Now, who do you think I am?"

"Jesse James, of course."

"Correct."

"You are?" asked Charlie.

"Yes."

"And he?" pointing to Frank.

"Is Frank James."

"Is he?"

"Yes."

"Then you are——"

"The James Boys."

A silence of a few moments fell on the group. Frank stirred up the fire to make it burn brighter and went out to look after the horses.

At last Jesse broke the silence.

"I have deemed it best," he said, "that we understand each other."

"Yes," Bob answered.

"We are outlaws."

"And we?"

"Likewise outlaws."

Bob sighed.

"The horses you rode belonged to Levi Nichols. He saw you and recognized you on them. Now, if you attempt to return to your homes you will find yourselves arrested."

"What are you going to do?" Bob asked.

"Keep my word with you—we will now go to Kentucky and if you will be true to us, daring and bold, we shall live such a life of grandeur and splendor as was never known to you before. It will be one continued round of excitement and splendor. You shall not lack for money. The wealth of kings shall be yours and you can soon win a name that will make you a terror."

Somehow the Ford Boys caught the fire of his enthusiasm and their eyes sparkled.

"Will you be one of our gallant band?"

"Yes," said Bob.

Bob was young, most enthusiastic and impulsive and was first to speak to proclaim himself one of the band.

"And you, Charley?"

"I will also."

"Then it's settled."

Jesse James took from a strange pocket on the inside of his vest over next his heart a long narrow book.

It was covered with black leather. Then he opened it and by aid of the fire-light read a most terrible oath which every one who joins the band was compelled to subscribe.

The Ford Boys sat in silence and listened to the terrible obligation which in its strange binding force equaled the famous black oath of Quantrell.

"Now you have both heard this?" he said when he had finished reading.

"Yes."

"What do you say? Will you subscribe to it?"

Both the Ford Boys were silent for a few moments, and then Bob who was first to speak, said: "We had as well, Charlie. It seems to be our only safety."

"Yes."

"You are sensible," said Jesse and he passed the book to them.

Each wrote his name.

"Now you are down. You are members of the James Boys band."

"We know it."

"Let's go to sleep."

Frank was left on guard while the other three slept.

In the middle of the night Bob and Charlie were both aroused from a sound nap by hearing wild cries of alarm and the sharp report of firearms.

"Up! up! up!" cried Jesse James, seizing them by the shoulders and shaking them, at the same time jerking them to their feet.

"What is it?"

"The sheriff and his men."

"Where is my horse?"

"Here, here!"

Bang!

Bang!

Blinding flashes and deafening reports rang out on the air on every side.

Bob staggered toward his horse.

"Are you hit?" asked Jesse.

"I don't know."

"Here—mount quick!"

"Oh, I am so sick."

"Let me help you to mount."

"I believe I shall fall."

"Courage, courage, Bob."

Frank and Charlie Ford were fighting like heroes.

Bang! Bang!

Crack! Crack! went gun and pistol.

The sheriff and his men were now so close that their powder burned the horses, and they were rearing and plunging.

"Where are you wounded, Bob?" asked Jesse James.

"In the shoulder."

"Can you sit on your horse?"

"I'll try."

Jesse leaped on Siroc.

He seized the reins in his teeth, and with a revolver in each hand charged on the posse, firing shots so rapidly that he looked like a fire-vomiting machine.

Men and horses tumbled over each other in their anxiety to get away.

"Away, Frank, away!" cried Jesse James, wheeling Siroc about and galloping toward his friends.

"Bob! can you ride?" he asked.

"I will try."

Away they flew.

Sheriff Timberlake rallied his forces and pursued. Then commenced a wild, desperate flight which lasted for two hours, but finally resulted in the escape of the James' and the Fords.

CHAPTER IV.

MOLLIE HAYS AND BOB.

ONE year has rolled by since the scene we described in our last chapter.

A year that was famous in the record of the great Missouri banditti.

It seemed as if the band had suddenly been inspired with new life and vigor.

Those who prophesied after the disaster at Northfield, Minnesota, in which two men had been killed and three captured, that the Missouri outlaws would soon be no more were destined to disappointment.

It was a bitter disappointment to many.

Trains and stage coaches were stopped by the daring highwaymen, banks boldly entered and robbed in broad daylight, and a more terrible state of affairs followed than had ever been known before.

New life and new blood seemed to have been suddenly instilled into the band.

A delightful day in the month of June is just drawing to a close.

The sun which all day long had pursued its course over the earth in golden splendor was now setting.

An old-fashioned farm-house stands at the road-side, and by the gate of the farm-house stands a pretty girl of fifteen or sixteen summers swinging on the gate.

Her eyes have a far-away look as if she was recalling something in the dim past.

"I'll never see him again," she finally said, and a sigh escaped her heaving breast.

Twilight was falling gently over the earth and objects growing more and more indistinct.

Suddenly the tramp of hoofs could be heard.

"Who is coming at this hour?" she asked herself.

Then she glanced up the hill and saw a horseman riding toward her.

He was a young horseman.

A jauntily-dressed young fellow, who had about him the bold, dashing air of a cavalier or a free rider.

"Who is he?" the girl asked, opening wide her great blue eyes.

She looked again, then turned her eyes to the house to see if any one was watching her.

"His form is familiar, yet I can't make out his face."

The girl had not long to wait. The dashing young cavalier galloped quickly up to her side and dismounting, cried:

"Mollie!"

"Bob!" she gasped.

"Do you know me?"

"Yes."

"You haven't forgotten me?"

"Oh, Bob, do you think I would ever forget you?"

"Mollie, I have come a long way to see you?"

"Have you—oh, Bob!"

"What?"

"I have heard such awful stories about you!"

"About me?"

"Yes, and Charlie."

"What were they?"

"I can't—I won't repeat them."

"Now, Mollie, I don't want you to think I am as bad as I am represented."

"I don't."

"You don't credit the stories, then?"

"No."

"Thank you, Mollie."

"But, Bob, why have you stayed away so long?"

Bob was silent for a moment, and then said:

"I could not come sooner, Mollie."

"Why?"

"People hate me, Mollie."

"Why do they, Bob? You haven't been bad, have you, to make people hate you?"

"Come with me somewhere, Mollie, where I can talk with you, and I will tell you my story. It is a dark story, but not so black as painted."

"Come in the house, Bob."

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"Your father and mother must not see me."

"Where do you want me to go with you, Bob?"

"Anywhere, Mollie, where we can talk without danger of being seen; this place is too public for us to talk here."

The old apple orchard was near. Behind it in their younger days they had played often, and now it invited them.

Mollie turned her great blue eyes fondly and trustingly to Bob Ford, who had now made a name as great perhaps as any of the bandits.

Could it be the innocent school boy whom she had once known and thought to be the model of innocence?

When they were hidden from the road by the old orchard, Bob and Mollie sat down upon the soft green grass, and he said:

"Mollie, I suppose you have heard all kinds of stories of me?"

"Yes."

"That I was a robber?"

"Yes."

"Worse?"

"Yes."

"What is the worst?"

"Oh, Bob, I can't tell you the worst."

"Do they say that I belong to the James Boys' band?"

"They do."

"Well, what can be worse?"

"That you murder."

"That is false, Mollie—I swear that that is false."

"I never believed it."

"I have been bad, I will admit, but I have never been so bad as painted."

"Oh, Bob, why did you——"

"Become bad?"

"Yes."

"I will tell you," said Bob.

But before explaining all to her he took a peep around the fence corners to assure himself that no one was watching for them.

"Bob, are you afraid of being seen?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Mollie, I have almost come to dread the sight of the face of my fellow men."

"Oh, Bob."

"Hush, you know not what it is to be hunted like a beast."

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"Would you protect me?"

"I would."

"You could not, Mollie."

"But you were going to tell me something. Don't forget to do so."

"Oh, yes, to tell you why I left the country."

"Yes."

"Well, you remember it is nearly three years ago that I was going to school to Mike Archer."

"Yes."

"And so were you."

"I was."

"You know, Mollie, how proud I was?"

"I do."

"No boy had ever beaten me at ball, foot race or wrestling."

"I know it."

"One day, Mike Archer he gave me a whipping."

"I remember it."

"You were present. You saw my degrada-

tion and humiliation and I swore I would be avenged."

"Oh, Bob!"

"I did. I brooded over the awful thing for months, until one night two men came to our house. They seemed like very nice gentlemen. One of them talked with me and hinted of a business by which a young man could become rich and powerful by being bold and desperate."

"Neither Charlie nor I suspected what he had reference to, but we met him and the other man a few weeks later at Snapper's."

"Did he tell you?"

"Not then."

"And the men were the James Boys?"

"Yes, but we didn't know it."

"Well, what did they propose? What did you do?"

"In some way I told him of the schoolmaster, Mike Archer, and of my humiliation."

"What did he say?"

"Jesse James and Frank both advised me to have satisfaction. To seek revenge."

"And you did?"

"How?"

"You have heard the story?"

"Only partly."

"They brought horses to us one night, and we mounted them and rode to Mike Archer's, took him out and whipped him."

"We were pursued, and next day almost captured. Then for the first time we learned that we rode stolen horses."

"Then you did not steal the horses from Levi Nichols?"

"No."

"Oh, I am so glad."

"You heard we did?"

"Yes."

"Well, Mollie, since then we have lived like hunted animals."

"Poor Bob!"

"My life has been one constant scene of excitement, but I have never yet shed blood."

"Oh, Bob, I am so glad."

"I am not a coward. I have shown that I could be bold and defiant."

"I know you could."

"But, Mollie, I am tired, oh, so tired of this constant flight, this constant watching—night rides, alarms, fights, and danger."

"Oh, Bob, I can guard you."

"You could not. Then again I go for days without food."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Bob, are you hungry?"

"I have fasted no food since yesterday."

"Well, I will bring you some."

She rose to go.

"Mollie, don't leave me just yet."

"Why?"

"I am afraid you will never come back."

"I will, Bob."

"I might not be here when you come, and, Mollie, I want to know before you go away from me whether you believe what I have told you to be true?"

"I do."

"It is true, Mollie. And I confessed that in part the charges against me were true, and that I have been bad."

"You did."

"Will you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"Mollie, how is your father about me?"

"Oh, Bob, I had forgotten papa. He is very hard on you."

"Is he?"

"Yes, and not long ago, when I said I wished you would come back, he vowed that if you did he would have you arrested and sent to jail."

"Mollie, it's hard."

"Yes—but papa is just terrible. He must not see you."

"I don't intend he shall. But you will not be hard on me, will you, Mollie?"

"No. But let me go now and get you some food."

"Go."

She was gone in a moment.

Bob's horse was grazing on the grass which grew in the common, and the young bandit kept a continual lookout everywhere lest he should be surprised.

"There is Timberlake and Carl Greene, Pinkerton's detective, on our heels," said Bob to himself. "Now I may expect a very unwelcome visit from them at any moment."

He went to the corner of the fence again and glanced up the road and down the road.

Then he took his revolver from his belt and examined it.

It was all right, and the chambers loaded.

"This never fails."

He returned it.

In a few moments Mollie came back. She had a basket, over which a clean neat napkin was spread.

"Well, Mollie, where is your father?" Bob asked.

"In the house. Oh, he must not know that you are here."

"He would, I presume, kill me."

"He would land you over to the officers."

"No, Mollie, I would never be taken alive. You may at some time hear of me being taken dead, but never alive."

"Oh, Bob, don't talk so awful. Here is some food. Eat—and here is a bottle of wine, I brought you from the cellar."

"Did they see you?"

"Who?"

"Your folks at home?"

"No, I took care not to be seen."

"That was right."

"Here is some boiled ham."

"That is good."

"And here is bread I made myself."

"That's better."

"Now eat what you want and take the remainder with you."

He began eating.

"Mollie, go to the corner and listen."

She did so.

"Do you hear a noise?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It is horses."

"Coming this way, too."

"What are you going to do, Bob?"

"Either run or fight."

"But they may not be after you."

"Yes, they are—there can be no question."

"Do you know who they are?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Either Timberlake or the detective. I don't know which. Perhaps both."

"Oh, what must we do?"

"I must go."

"And leave your dinner?"

"Yes."

"And you so hungry?"

"Yes, Mollie, I am very hungry."

"Take it with you."

He took up the basket and mounted.

"Good-bye, Mollie."

"Good-by," she sobbed.

"Don't let them see you cry. Be brave."

"I won't," wiping her eyes.

"Mollie."

"What?"

"Do you ever want to see me again?"

"Yes."

"You shall."

Then he turned his horse's head about and was gone like a flash.

Mollie waited until he was completely lost to view from the road, and then went out into the broad, dusty thoroughfare.

The roar of approaching horses could be distinctly heard.

He was right she thought. They are officers coming for him.

A cavalcade drew rein in front of her father's house, and a large powerful man called:

"Helloa, helloa."

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Hayes, coming to the door.

"Is that you, Jim Hayes?"

"Yes, who are you?"

"Timberlake."

"The sheriff."

"Yes."

"You don't want me."

"No—we are after one of the gang of James Boys."

"I hope you will get him."

"We traced him to your house."

"My house?"

"Yes."

"He is not here; search."

"Perhaps he went past it," suggested one.

At this moment Mollie came sauntering leisurely up the road.

She got there just in time for the sheriff to ask:

"Say, young lady, have you seen anyone go by on a black horse?"

"No, sir," she answered.

"How long have you been in the road?"

"Since before sunset."

"Then he has not come this far," said Sheriff Timberlake. "Boys, he has doubled on us, and let us back at once and get on his trail."

Timberlake and his posse immediately wheeled

about their horses and galloped away like mad men.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHOT THROUGH THE FENCE.

ONLY a short distance away from where the scene had just been enacted, Bob Ford sat on his horse.

"Well done for Mollie," said the bandit.

He laughed to himself as he galloped down a wooded path to the creek bank.

There he halted a few moments, undecided what to do.

"With Timberlake hot on our trail, we have poor prospects of making much of a scout in this neighborhood," he thought. "But I'll be at the rendezvous at midnight."

Then he galloped down the bank of the creek, which was lined with a dense forest.

He came to a place where the path crossed the stream, and galloped along a road over a hill.

"Woa, Dick! We'll get there too soon," said Bob.

He drew rein at the foot of a great oak tree and dismounted.

A year had made a great change in Bob Ford. He was no longer the bright, innocent youth, but a dashing, reckless brigand.

There was an air about him so decidedly brigandish, that he would be a suspicious character to meet with on a dark night.

"Well, I am in for it now," said Bob, with a reckless little laugh. "I'm a full fledged highwayman. I don't know how it began, nor is there any knowing how it is going to end. I have never had any intention of harming any one, but it seems that everything has gone wrong with me. I love adventure, wild excitement and a stirring life, and I am getting my fill of it, there can be no doubt."

An hour was spent there beneath the tree and again mounting he galloped away to the school house, the place of rendezvous.

"I have one consolation," Bob said to himself as he galloped through the woods. "Mollie is my my friend."

Two miles more in a round-about circuit brought him back to within a mile of the farm house of Mr. Hayes, to what was known as the Hayes school house.

The school house stood in a dense wood upon the top of a grassy ridge and there was a little cleared spot around it all about which the grim dark and silent forest rose.

There were but three roads leading to the school house and there were deep dark ravines on every side except where the three roads approached it.

"It must be the barn!" thought Bob as he came in sight of the school house.

"Halt!" called a voice.

He drew rein at once, and seized a pistol.

A shrill whistle sounded.

Bob answered the whistle.

"Who are you?"

"I know that voice," thought Bob. "Charlie," he called.

"Bob."

"It's I."

"Come on."

"Are they all here?"

"No."

"Who have arrived?"

"No one but Jesse."

"Hasn't Frank nor none of the others come?"

"Not yet."

"Will they come?"

"Of course."

"Well, we are once more at the old school-house, Charlie."

"Yes."

"Do you remember the last time we were here?"

"Very well."

"Mike Archer flogged me."

"And you said you would never come back again until you had got even with him."

"I did. Don't you think I am even?"

"Yes."

"Well we have led a curious life since then."

"Bob."

"What?"

"Don't it seem we have lived an age since then?"

"Yes, a thousand years."

"What a world of changes has come about since last we left here."

Then the boys sighed.

They were not happy.

Men who are engaged in the most prosperous business in the world which their conscience does not approve cannot be happy.

"But we have had a good time, Charlie," said Bob with a laugh.

"We have."
 "We have been everywhere."
 "Lived like kings part of the time."
 "That's so, brother, but part of the time we have had a hard time of it."
 "I suppose such things will sometimes happen in all kinds of calling."
 "Oh, I wish—"
 "What?"
 "Nothing."
 The Ford Boys at this early period in their career of crime dared not even to each other breathe the wishes which came in their hearts. Bob at last said:
 "I will go up now and see Jesse James and you—"
 "I am on guard here."
 "Are you?"
 "Yes."
 "Well keep your eyes open, Charlie, for Timberlake and a large posse of men are in the neighborhood."
 "What!" cried Charlie.
 "Didn't you know it?"
 "No. How did you learn it?"
 "Saw 'em."
 "When?"
 "A little after sunset."
 "Where?"
 "At farmer Hayes' house."
 "You were there?"
 "Yes."
 "See any of them?"
 "Yes."
 "Who?"
 "Mollie."
 "None others?"
 "No."
 "Did she recognize you?"
 "Of course, I had a long talk with her and she brought me an elegant supper."
 "Ah, Bob, you have ruined us."
 "Why?"
 "Mollie will give us away."
 "She will do nothing of the sort."
 "Won't she?"
 "No! I will trust my life in Mollie; I know her."
 "But, Bob, it won't do to let the captain learn of this."
 "Why?"
 "He won't approve it."
 "No, he won't learn of us ever making ourselves known to any one who once knew us."
 "It is strictly against rules."
 After a moment's silence Bob said:
 "But I must tell him about Timberlake."
 "Of course. Did Timberlake chase you?"
 "No."
 "Didn't he see you?"
 "No."
 "Did you see him?"
 "Yes."
 "Where was you?"
 "Hidden among some bushes. Mollie threw them off the track."
 "Did she?"
 "Yes."
 "Then she must be our friend."
 "In fact and in truth she is."
 "Well, I hope she may get them entirely off the track."
 "So do I, but, Charlie, I must go to Jesse now and report."
 Charlie sounded a peculiar whistle, and said:
 "Wait."
 Bob halted for the answer.
 A moment later it came.
 "All right; go ahead. Look sharp now. It won't do to fool with the chief."
 "I know that."
 Bob reached the school-house, passed inside the rail fence which surrounded it, and made his horse fast.
 The door was closed and the school-house dark.
 Bob walked boldly to the door and knocked.
 "Come in," said a deep, base voice from within.
 Bob carefully opened the door, and a voice said:
 "Stop—who are you?"
 It was dark as pitch inside the school-house, and Bob could see nothing.
 "A friend."
 "What's your name?"
 "Bob."
 No doubt but that the bandit king recognized the voice. But he always made assurances doubly sure.
 Now that he was assured that it was Bob, he flashed a light in the young bandit's face almost blinding him, but at the same time revealing the newcomer to Jesse.

"It's all right, Bob, come in," said Jesse, turning off the light from his lantern.
 "Jesse, you take a great many precautions," Bob remarked.
 "Yes—eternal vigilance is alone the price of safety to us, Bob."
 "I know it; but my voice ought to have convinced you."
 "Hearing is only one of the senses and may be deceived. Never depend on one test alone; try all," said Jesse James.
 The first thing the bandit chief tried to impress on a new recruit was caution.
 "Always be cautious," he said. "Be cautious of friends, be cautious of strangers, be cautious of each other, and cautious of yourselves."
 "Well, Bob, what have you to report?" Jesse asked as soon as Bob was seated.
 "Something alarming."
 "What is it?"
 "Timberlake is in the neighborhood."
 "Is he?"
 "Yes."
 "Have you seen him?"
 "I did."
 "Where?"
 "At a farm house about a mile from here."
 "When?"
 "At sunset."
 "Did he see you?"
 "No."
 "Quite sure?"
 "Yes."
 "Why are you sure?"
 "Because I would have got a shot or chase if they had seen me."
 "There's some truth in that."
 "Very much truth in it."
 "Which way were they going?"
 "They were coming in this direction, and stopped and talked with a farmer then went off in an eastern direction."
 "He put them on the wrong scent?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Well, let me see. We have no friends in this part of the country have we?"
 "No."
 "But you have acquaintances here."
 "I have, but I would not dare show myself to many of them."
 "No—but do you know the farmer with whom Timberlake talked?"
 "His name was Hayes."
 "Hayes, Hayes, old Jimmy Hayes?"
 Jesse shook his head.
 "He is no friend of ours."
 Again the signal in the distance sounded.
 "Other arrivals," said Jesse James.
 He answered the signal.
 Then came an interval of silence.
 A few moments later when the sound of footsteps were heard the click-click of Jesse's revolver, indicated that he was prepared to receive a foe as well as a friend.
 But it proved to be Frank and Wood Hite.
 "Come in," said Jesse.
 "Others are coming," said Frank.
 "Near?"
 "Yes."
 "Who?"
 "Dick Little, Jim Cummins, and Hobbs Kerry."
 "Well, we are ready for business as soon as all get here."
 "We will want to get through, Jesse, as soon as possible," remarked Frank.
 "Why?"
 "Timberlake is in the neighborhood."
 "Is he?"
 "Yes."
 "How far away?"
 "He was seen half an hour before sunset three miles away."
 "He was seen since sunset only a mile away."
 "Ay."
 "Yes."
 "By whom?"
 "Bob saw him."
 "Bob Ford?"
 "Yes."
 "Where?"
 "At Mr. Hayes' house," Bob answered.
 "But he went back toward the east," said Jesse.
 Frank James gave a quick, nervous gasp and said:
 "Then, Jesse, we had better get away from here just as soon as we can."
 Again the whistle sounded.
 "Who now?"
 "That is the remainder."
 So it proved.

Jim Cummins was sent out to act as picket also.
 The banditti now assembled in the school-house, and Jesse James turning on the light, said:
 "Now, boys, let us get to discussing the matter."
 They at once began to talk over the prospects. Another said:
 "Shall it be a bank or a train?"
 "A train," put in Dick Little.
 "How many say train?"
 "I."
 "I."
 "And I."
 "What say you, Bob?"
 "Either."
 "Then it shall be a train. What train?"
 "The Chicago and Alton. They always carry a good healthy express," put in Kerry.
 "You are right."
 "How many say the Chicago and Alton? All who do signify the same by saying aye."
 "Aye," rang out the answer like a thunder peal.
 "Then that is settled. It will be the Chicago and Alton."
 "When?" asked Dick Little.
 "One week from to-night."
 "That's it. One week from to-night."
 There was a moment's silence, when suddenly there came a strange sharp cry.
 "Danger!" cried Jesse.
 "To arms."
 Every man was on his feet.
 "Surrender!" cried a voice from the woods.
 Crack!
 Crack!
 Crack!
 Bullets whizzed into the school-house.
 "Outside!" thundered Jesse James, cocking a pair of revolvers. "Outside, and cut your way through."
 The banditti rushed out of the house in a body. The horses came thundering toward them.
 All was confusion. Men could be seen galloping hither and thither, and there was rushing, shouting, shooting.
 The screams of frightened horses, yells of combatants, and thunder of horses' hoofs, mingled with sharp reports, made a fearful din.
 This was bandit fighting in Missouri.
 Bob Ford stood near the gate.
 "Bob, Bob, where are you?" called a voice, in the darkness.
 "Here."
 It was Charlie's.
 "Bob, we are in a close place."
 "Yes."
 "They are all around us."
 "How many?"
 "Fifty."
 Bang!
 Bang!
 Those last shots were from a double-barreled shotgun.
 "Bob, are you hit?"
 "No."
 "Then you must look out."
 At this moment Bob saw a man by the fence. He fired through the fence, and the man fell.
 "Well done, Bob, well done," cried Jesse.
 "Did I kill him?" asked Bob, frightened at the thought.
 "It seems so."
 Bob was horrified.
 He tried to see if the man got up, but several persons were between them, and he was forced back to the horses.
 Then they mounted and dashed wildly through the gate.
 Timberlake's men tried to stop them, but it was all in vain. They pressed on and on, and cut their way through.
 All through the wild, terrible charge Bob Ford was like one bewildered and confused. He sat on his horse as one in a dream.
 They were free from pursuers and far away, and he asked himself over and over again:
 "Was that shot through the fence fatal?"

CHAPTER VI.

IN A FOREST FIRE.

"HALT!" called Jesse James.
 Every man drew rein at once.
 "Are all here?" Jesse asked.
 "I believe so," Frank answered.
 "Jim Cummins?"
 "Yes."
 "Go over there and see if all are here."
 Jim Cummins did so.
 "Are all here, Jim?"
 "Yes."

"Have you counted every man?"
 "Every one."
 "Are any hurt?"
 "No."
 "Well, boys, we came out of a close place."
 "Indeed we did," said Jim Cummins.
 "For a moment I thought we would not get out of the fire," put in Wood Hite.
 "Oh, we are creatures of fate," said Jesse.
 "It seems that way."
 "I wish we had downed more of those rascals," said Frank James, somewhat bitterly.
 "Did you see Bob drop one?"
 "Through the fence?"
 "Yes."
 "I did. Was he killed?"
 "No," answered Wood Hite. "I saw him get up right away."
 Bob Ford heaved a sigh of relief.
 A few moments later, when he and Charley were apart from the others, Bob said:
 "Oh, Charley, I could almost shout for joy."
 "Why?"
 "I am so happy."
 "What has made you so happy, Bob?"
 "I did not kill him."
 "Didn't you want to?"
 "No."
 "Then why did you shoot at him?"
 "I don't know. He was going to shoot at me, and all was in such excitement and hubbub, I got excited and blazed away with the rest. But if I had killed him then I would have been a murderer and hang."
 "Are you afraid of being hung?" asked Jesse James, who had come near to them unobserved.
 "Yes."
 "Well, then, kill the sheriff's detectives and police. Make them afraid of you."
 Bob made no answer.
 They were now in a dense lonely forest.
 Such forests are only to be found in Missouri and Southern states.
 In their dark, lonesome haunts one could wander for weeks without being seen by a human being.
 There the deer and bear still roamed in defiance of the hunter, and men have been lost and wandered until starvation or death by some wild animal found them.
 Jesse and Frank James were well acquainted with the forests.
 They could traverse them as easily as the mariner can the boundless ocean, and when they were lost in the forest they had only to get the four points of the compass and steer their way out.
 "Will Timberlake pursue us here?" asked Wood Hite.
 "No," said Dick Little.
 "Why?"
 "Because he has enough of us."
 "Don't be too sure, Dick."
 "Why?"
 "Timberlake is not so easily disposed of."
 "Do you think not?"
 "Yes."
 "How do you know?"
 "He's not easily settled."
 "You are afraid of him."
 "I am not. But I am not a fool."
 "Who is?"
 "Any man who says Timberlake is done for."
 "Do you call me a fool?"
 "Do you call me a coward?"
 "Yes."
 "Liar."
 "Hold!" cried Jesse.
 He leaped in between the angry bandits just as their pistols were drawn.
 "In Heaven's name what does this mean?"
 "He called me a fool."
 "He called me a coward."
 "Dick Little, Wood Hite, I am ashamed of you."
 Jesse then shook the two men by their shoulders and pushed them asunder.
 "Shame on you. Would you ruin the band?" he asked.
 "No, but I won't be insulted by Dick Little," put in Wood Hite.
 "Silence."
 "And I won't be insulted by Wood—"
 "Silence!"
 Jesse James was master of the situation.
 He commanded a desperate band of men, and it required desperate measures.
 Jesse knew his men, and gazing at them with an eye which flashed like fire in the gloom of night, he cried:
 "I will shoot dead the first man who quarrels, be he in the right or wrong. If you have grievances, bring them to me, and I will adjust them all satisfactorily."

The two belligerent bandits slunk away, and Hobbs Kerry approaching Dick Little, whispered:
 "Dick!"
 "What?"
 "The captain means it."
 Dick ground his teeth in silence.
 Wood Hite retired grumbling.
 Jesse James went to him, and said:
 "Wood Hite, you ungrateful dog, I will have no dissensions bred by you. Do you hear me?"
 "Yes."
 "If you utter another word I'll stab you to the heart."
 "Jesse—"
 "Silence, dog! I will kill you!"
 Wood Hite's eyes kindled with wrath.
 Jesse turned away, and the discomfited bandit growled through his teeth:
 "He is a tyrant!"
 Bob Ford heard the remark, but said nothing.
 The banditti were dismounted in the dense wood, and Jesse James determined to pass the night there.
 He had a fire built, and the horses picketed, sentries placed, and the men grouped about the fire.
 Soon all were dozing.
 The night was well nigh spent.
 Suddenly on the air, there came the loud report of a gun.
 "Charley! Charley!" cried Bob Ford, shaking his brother.
 "What is it?"
 "Enemy."
 "Steady all!"
 The sleepy Ford Boys recognized the thundering tones of Jesse James as he uttered the cry to his men.
 "Steady all! beat them back!"
 What a wild yell!
 What a charge, and the crash of guns and snorting of horses!
 Friend and foe were so mingled that in the darkness it was difficult to tell one from the other.
 Horsemen dashed right through the camp-fire, scattering blazing brands in every direction.
 Whoops and shouts and screams and yells went up on every side.
 The Ford Brothers were together.
 "Bob!" whispered Charley.
 "Well, Charley?"
 "Let's not get separated."
 "No; stand together."
 Bullets and buckshot whistled like hail.
 A horse was killed, and fell almost on Bob Ford.
 He got out of the way as soon as he could, and Charley whispered:
 "Bob, let's go."
 "Where?"
 "I don't know. Anywhere; so that we can get away from here."
 "Well—lead out."
 "Where are our horses?"
 Suddenly a bright light flashed upon the scene.
 Great streams of blazing fire shot up in the heavens and the sky brightened every moment.
 "Charley!"
 "Bob."
 "The woods are on fire."
 "I know it."
 Wild cries came from the combatants.
 The Ford Boys had now retreated to a considerable distance from where the conflict between the banditti and officers was raging.
 They saw a sight that was grandly sublime, and yet awful to them.
 There rose up toward the skies great flashing streams of fire lapping the trees and licking the tops, shooting many feet above the dry pines.
 The thunder of falling trees drowned the cries of combatants.
 "The forest is on fire; the forest is on fire!" the stentorian voice of Timberlake could be heard calling.
 Then he sounded a whistle and called off his men.
 Jesse James had mounted Siroc and was making great efforts to rally his band.
 The Ford Boys had reached a slight eminence and looked down on the scene terrible and yet grandly sublime.
 "Oh, it is awful, Bob."
 "It is, Charley."
 "Do you see any one killed?"
 "No."
 "There are two horses lying still and quiet."
 "But no men?"
 "No."
 "I guess no one was killed."

"It was a terrible fight for no man to be killed."
 "It was indeed."
 "Yet fights are always more scary than dangerous."
 "Yes."
 "I wish we had our horses."
 "The poor creatures will burn to death, I fear."
 At this moment they heard the snort of horses. Jesse James had dismounted, and assisted by Frank, Jim Cummins was cutting loose the horses.
 The James Boys nearly always had the saddles on their steeds.
 "What is that coming, Charley?"
 "Our horses."
 "Yes."
 "Woa! Here, boy!"
 The horses, hearing familiar voices of their masters, turned about and came dashing down toward them as fast as they could come.
 "Here, here we are."
 "Bob."
 "Well?"
 "I've got mine."
 "So have I!"
 "Mount!"
 They leaped in the saddle.
 The scorching, blistering heat was every moment growing nearer and more oppressive.
 "Bob, we must fly for our lives!" cried Charley.
 And away they sped.
 Like thunder peals came the horses of their pursuers after them.
 But though the sheriff's posse were all about them, they made no efforts at hostility.
 They were a common enemy which all were compelled to flee from the forest fire, and that enemy engaged their attention.
 Away they sped like the wind, and gradually left the shrieking, roaring flames behind.

CHAPTER VII.

IN KANSAS CITY.

A WEEK later two young men mounted on horses jaded by travel, entered Kansas City.
 Both wore long brown hair almost to their shoulders. One had a light beard and one only a mustache.
 One had but to glance at them to see by their dress and appearance they were cowboys.
 They carried the lassos at their saddles, wore the provincial broad-brim and had the bold, free, careless way of men who are accustomed to a life of danger on the plains.
 But they were only disguised.
 Old Tom Martin kept one of those saloons or public houses on the suburbs of the city.
 Being somewhat removed from the main part of town, it was not under the strictest police surveillance and was generally accounted as a tough place.
 Thither the young bloods and old bloods from Kansas City, came to quaff the bowl, and it was suspected behind the green screen to gamble.
 Some were supposed to spend little fortunes there.
 As the two new comers entered, several gents of the upper class of society were in the front apartment drinking beer and whiskey.
 There is a judge of the supreme court and of the court of appeals, lawyers and doctors, who would not for the world have anybody know that they were there.
 "Well, Jimmy," cried a red-faced, hook-nosed man who was called Judge, "How is Andy getting along?"
 Jimmy was a dish-faced young man, whose hair was flecked with gray.
 From his talk one would suppose that he was a lawyer.
 "First rate, judge."
 The two were unmistakably politicians.
 "Goin' to be re-elected?"
 "You bet."
 "That's right."
 "How are your chances?"
 "Term's not up for several years."
 "I know. Let's drink to our prospects."
 "I'm goin' to elevate your entire family to the bench."
 "Can you, Judge?"
 "Yes. Get out of that North Missouri—"
 "Hello, judge," interrupted Jimmy, touching the elbow of the judge, "do you see those two cowboys?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, what are they doin' here?"
 "I don't know."
 "Dangerous fellows."

"Why?"
 "Don't like their eyes."
 "Nor I; but if we can get 'em in a game we'll fleece 'em."

They called for more whisky and drank. The two cowboys who had entered glanced about the apartment, and then went to a round table, which was at a far corner of the room, and sat down.

"Bob," said one, in a whisper, "do you see any one you know?"
 "No. Do you?"
 "I don't."

"Those two fellows, I believe, are lawyers."
 "One calls the other judge."
 "The judge and the lawyer were now talking in whispers."

"It's all over if they suspected who we are, Bob."

"No it isn't."
 "Why not?"
 "We've got our good pistols yet, and we will make such a fight as will alarm Kansas City."
 "Would you resist?"
 "Yes."

"We would be killed."
 "Better be killed than taken alive."
 "Yes, you are right."
 "What will you have?" asked a waiter, coming around to wait upon them.

"Bring us whisky," said Bob, drawing a well filled purse.
 "All right."
 "And hurry."

The waiter, a grim looking fellow, gave him a glance that was withering, and said:

"Young man, don't be too impolite."
 "Mind your own business."
 "Bob, don't," persisted Charlie.
 "Why, I would just as soon shoot the rascal's head from his shoulders as not."

The waiter went to the bar, and whispered to the man behind it:

"There are a pair of toughs out there; give me my revolver."

"Here it is."
 He put it in his pocket.

"Now I will make him eat his words if he don't mind his eyes."

But when he went back Jimmie and the Judge had formed the acquaintance of the new-comers. Jimmie was talking to them.

"I don't live here," he said, his eyes flashing with the liquor he had drank. "I am a lawyer, and my home is about one hundred and seventy-five miles northeast of here."

"Do you practice law?" asked Bob.
 "Oh yes," said Jimmie, twirling his sickly little mustache.

Jimmie had a great habit of twirling his mustache.

He was a great boaster and seemed to think that he was the greatest man on earth.

"Well sir, if we ever get in trouble will you help us out?"

"Oh yes."

"Thank you."
 "I never fail in any case I undertake. My brother is judge, you see."

"But he is not here."

"No, not of this district, but I can help you I think any way. This man is a judge also on a higher bench and he can help you."

The waiter brought the liquor, and Charlie, said:

"Two more glasses for our friends: what will you have, gentlemen?"

"Whisky, my friend," said Jimmy twirling his mustache.

"Two whiskies hot."

"Now my friends, I want to show you a little trick," said the man called judge.

"What is it?" asked Bob.

He took some cards and after shuffling them a little, said:

"I'll lay out three. There they are, King Queen and ace. Now see," and he whirled them about. "Jimmie, can you pick up the ace?"

"Yes."
 "Do it."

Jimmie did so.

Again he whirled the cards and asked Bob:

"Can you?"
 "Yes."

"Which is the ace?"

Bob turned up the ace.

"Now come with us in the other room and I will bet you ten dollars you won't pick up the ace."

"Charlie let's go."

The gamblers rose to their feet and Jimmie's eyes sparkled brightly while he twirled his mustache.

"I am sure we'll take in two suckers," he whispered to the judge.

"Yes, but cowboys are dangerous," the judge answered.

Little did they dream how dangerous those men were.

They went into the adjoining apartment, and accompanied by the Fords.

As they entered Bob and Charlie exchanged glances.

"Bob, be careful."

"Charlie keep your hands always near your revolvers."

These were the only precautionary terms they uttered.

Then they went into the apartment set apart for gambling.

Here a wild scene met their view. Men of every class were in this den of iniquity.

"Here's a table," said the judge. All four sat down.

"Now see," he spread out the cards.

"Yes," said Bob.

"I'll go you ten you won't pick out the ace if you'll let me shuffle them three times."

"I'll do it."

He shuffled, and Bob turned up a card.

"You've lost?"

"Yes."

"Want to try it again?"

"I do."

"How much?"

"As much as you say."

"Will you stand a hundred?"

"Yes."

"Five?"

"A thousand."

Jimmie and the judge exchanged glances. There was a ring in the young fellow's voice, which they could not just understand.

"Do you mean it?"

"Money talks!"

Bob drew out a tremendous roll of bills and counted out a thousand.

"Now, sir, cover it or shut up your mouth."

"Shall I, Jimmie?"

"I guess you'll have to."

"Yes, or close up business," said Bob, with a bold, swaggering manner.

"All right, here goes."

The gambler laid a thousand dollars down upon the table.

"Shuffle your cards and be quick about it," said Bob, in a fierce, quick tone.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you done?"

"Yes."

"Ready?"

"Can you pick out the ace for the pile?"

"Yes."

"Do it."

Quick as a flash Bob put both hands to his belt. With his right he drew his ugly knife and with his left a revolver.

Down came the knife like a flash of electric vengeance into one of the cards, pinning it fast to the table, while the cocked revolver almost touched the face of the judge.

"Turn up the other two, you scoundrel, or I will scatter your brains over the floor!" cried Bob.

The judge hesitated.

"Oh, oh, oh, sir! Don't, don't, don't!" gasped Jimmie. "Please don't harm me."

He made a leap to get out of the room, but Charlie Ford seized the scoundrel by the neck and kicked him soundly.

"There, you rascal, see how you like that?" he cried.

Jimmie howled, yelled, and begged for mercy.

"Turn up the other two quick!" cried Bob, never for an instant taking his eye off the judge.

The judge saw that he meant business. It wouldn't do to trifle with him, and quickly turned over the other two.

Neither had the ace on it, and Bob raking in the money, said:

"I have won."

"Hold, sir!"

"Sit down."

"Boys, are you going to see me robbed?" cried the judge.

"Boys, do you want a few first-class funerals? If you do you can have them!" cried Bob, flourishing his revolver before their faces.

"Bob?"

"Well, Charlie?"

"Come, let's go."

"Stop them."

Several men started to their feet.

"Sit down."

Bob Ford spoke in tones of thunder and his revolver meant business.

Then they retired, backing out of the door.

The last thing seen of them was the muzzles of Bob's revolvers and Charlie's boot as he kicked Jim Ellison, the blubbing lounge and capper for the gambler.

The gamblers were overawed for a few moments.

Then there went up a howl.

"Are we going to stand this?"

"Robbed!"

"Backed down!"

"Browbeaten!"

"Will we stand it?"

"No!"

"What will we do?"

"Lynch 'em!"

"That's it!"

"Follow 'em!"

"Kill 'em!"

"Call the police!"

And those men who had defied the police and dreaded them above all other things in the world were now ready to appeal to them for aid.

"Yes, let's have the police!"

Bob and Charlie went out of the house coolly and unconcernedly and were mounting.

Crack!

Sharp and keen rang out the report of the pistol.

The bullet whizzed close to the cheek of Bob Ford.

"Charlie!"

"Are you hit?"

"No, but I won't stand that."

"Mount, and let's go."

Bob drew his pistol as he placed his foot in the stirrup.

"Crack!"

A second shot rang out sharp and keen, and the bullet struck the horn of his saddle.

"That will do," he roared.

Bang! bang! bang! went three shots in quick succession right into the door.

And then such shrieks and yells as rose on the air at this fusillade was never before heard by human ears.

Jim Ellison was struck by a splinter cut by a bullet from the door, and lay on the floor bawling murder and declaring that he was killed.

"Where are you going, Bob," Charlie asked.

"To town."

"Won't it be dangerous?"

"Safer than here."

On their way they met two mounted police, who asked:

"Where are you from?"

"The country."

"Did you hear of a shooting scrape?"

"We passed a house where there seemed to be a fight."

"Where?"

"Down by those green trees."

"It's those gamblers at it again, Bill. We'll have to pull the entire house."

"Yes."

The police went on at a thundering gallop, and the Ford Boys, making the best of their way to the Grand Missouri Hotel, sent their horses to a livery barn and went to their room.

"Well, Bob!"

"Well, Charlie?"

"Adventures thicken."

"Yes, but so far we are ahead. Didn't I earn that thousand dollars easily?"

"Yes."

"I'll have more of that if they ever try to play me for a sucker again."

"Yes."

"Ha, ha—if they think they can take us in at such a game they are mistaken."

"Right you are."

Then they rang the bell for a porter.

"What will you have?" he asked.

"Bring us our dinners."

"Yes, sir."

He brought their dinners, and while they were eating there came a rap at the door.

"Who is there?" asked Bob.

"Gentleman to see you," answered the porter.

"What does he want?"

"You!" answered a deep-toned voice, the door was flung open, and before them stood half a dozen armed policemen.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROBBING A TRAIN.

FOR a moment both Bob and Charlie Ford were taken aback, and completely thunderstruck by the sudden appearance of the police.

"Hold!" cried Bob, leveling a revolver at the heart of the sergeant of police.

"Surrender!" cried the officer.

"What do you want with me?"

"We have warrants for your arrest."
 "On what charge?"
 "Wounding David Floyd."
 "When?"
 "To-day."
 "Where?"
 "At the Green Trees."
 "Well, gentlemen, you are mistaken."
 "We are not."
 "You are."
 "You are the men we want."
 "We are not," Bob answered.
 "Come along, anyway."

While Bob had been holding this conversation Charlie's quick eyes discovered a door at their rear.

He poured some powder on the carpet, and putting the muzzle of a pistol to it, fired.

The report was accompanied with a tremendous puff, and the room was filled with smoke.

Bob, who was aware that his brother was up to some sort of a strategy, threw himself on the floor and fired three shots in the direction of the officers' feet.

One bullet struck off a policeman's toe.

And others were touched, so there was a general scampering.

"Bob, Bob!" cried Charlie, "come here."

In a moment Bob was at Charlie's side.

They sprang through the door, and in a moment were in a sort of closet.

It was a long, narrow closet, and at the far end was another door opening into another room.

From this room they made an exit into a long corridor.

"Now, Bob," whispered Charlie, "what are we to do?"

"I don't know."

"Just around the corner are the police."

At this moment a tall, powerful man was seen coming toward them.

"This way!" he whispered.

"Who are you?" asked Bob.

"Come, and ask no questions."

"Charlie!"

"What?"

"It's Jesse James."

"Follow then."

"Yes."

They followed him, and were soon at a stairway.

Down this they flew.

It was now growing dark, and the gas had been lighted.

When they gained the lower hall, the Ford Boys were astonished, through an open door, to see their horses, already saddled and bridled, awaiting them.

"Who did this?" began Bob.

"Hush, no more!" interrupted Jesse James.

Then they went to the horses, vaulted in the saddles, and went galloping away as rapidly as they could down the street.

Jesse had left Frank to hold the horses, while he went up into the hotel to bring down the Ford Boys.

At the next corner they were joined by Jim Cummins and Dick Little.

The cavalcade galloped out of Kansas City unharmed.

When Bob and Charlie sought to ascertain how Jesse James came to be there just in the nick of time and save them in such a remarkable manner, he avoided their questions.

The chief of the greatest banditti ever known in the world was a man who usually did his work in secret. He seldom made known to any one what his intentions were, and had a way of appearing at the strangest, oddest times imaginable.

They escaped from Kansas City unharmed, and the banditti resumed their ravages on society.

The reader will remember that at the last meeting of the James Boys it was resolved to rob the Chicago and Alton train.

The time agreed upon had to be postponed as they had met with some reverses since the attack.

A new time had been set, and the night for the job came.

Jesse James and Bob Ford disguised themselves, and boarded the train twenty-five miles above the place at which the robbery was to be done.

"Bob, how are your nerves?" Jesse asked as they took their seats.

"Steady."

"Do you know your task?"

"No."

"Go forward to the engine."

"When the train is going?"

"Yes, at full speed."

"How can I?"

"You are active!"

"Yes."

"Go through from car to car until you reach the end of the baggage car."

"Yes."

"Then open the door and leap on the tender."

"Yes."

"From there you must cross over and cover the fireman and engineer with your revolver."

"You have given me a pretty dangerous task."

"But the reward."

"Is it big?"

"A hundred thousand."

"You know it?"

"I am counting on what is in the express alone."

"Do you know?"

"I do."

"How?"

"Don't ask me as to my source of information. That is my secret."

"Well, I will do the best I can the work allotted to me."

"Jehu, what a pretty girl!"

"Where?" asked Bob.

"Three seats in front on the left."

Bob cast his eyes in that direction and started to his feet.

"Sit down."

"I know her," Bob gasped, almost breathless.

"Then say nothing to any one about it."

"Why?"

"Don't let her know you."

"But I must speak to her."

"No, you won't."

"Why?"

"Would you give all our plans away?"

"No."

"Then sit still."

"But I can trust her."

"Trust no one."

Then he pulled Bob down at his side and Bob became silent and morose.

After a few moments silence Jesse James, in an undertone yet evincing great interest, asked:

"Do you know her?"

"I do."

"Who is she?"

"Mollie Hayes."

"Mollie Hayes?"

"Yes."

"Where does she live?"

"In Clay County."

"Is she a farmer's girl?"

"Yes."

"And was your neighbor?"

"She was."

"Have you ever seen her since?"

"Since I became one of you?"

"That's what I mean."

"Once."

"When?"

"Not long ago."

"How long ago?"

"Three weeks."

Then Bob remembered that he had kept the meeting between him and Mollie a secret.

"Where was it?"

"At her home, but why do you ask so many questions about it, captain?"

"Answer, and never mind my motives."

"Well, what more do you want?"

"Was it on the evening we were attacked?"

"Yes."

"Did she see you?"

"Yes."

"Talk with you?"

"Yes."

"And you never told me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you would be angry and put a wrong construction on it."

"Would I?"

"Yes."

"Well, you have violated one of our rules. That girl, no doubt, was the cause of the attack on us."

"Captain, you are mistaken. But for her it would have been made sooner. She told him I had gone in another direction and sent him on another trail."

Jesse was a long time silent feasting his eyes on the beauty of the girl.

Then he turned to Bob and said:

"Bob."

"Yes, sir."

"Is she a flame?"

"A sweetheart."

"Of course it means the same thing."

"Yes."

"I thought so."

Then he added in a lower tone, but not so low that Bob did not hear him:

"She is a wonderfully pretty girl."

Bob grew uneasy. Jesse seemed to become infatuated, and that desperate man's admiration was dangerous.

The train now ran into a station, and halted to let off some passengers.

As soon as it started again Bob asked:

"Jesse, how far is it?"

"There is one more station, then we leave that, and three miles further is a water tank. We will stop at the water tank, and as soon as we pull out from the tank and get under way, I will give you word to go forward."

"You will have just five minutes then to stop the engineer. How are your nerves?"

"Steady."

"That's good."

But Bob Ford was a little nervous.

He glanced at Mollie, sweet, innocent as he had once been, and heaved a sigh for the time when he was as innocent as she. But vain regrets were banished, and he made his mind up to now be a desperado.

The station was reached.

"Now, Bob, be steady."

"Yes, sir."

The station was passed. Then the train whistled for the water tank.

Jesse consulted his watch.

It was a few minutes after midnight.

"Just the time," he said.

They slowed up to the water-tank and took on water.

Again they pulled out, slowly at first.

Bob's heart was beating like a trip-hammer.

Jesse said, in a cool, determined voice:

"Let her go!"

Bob rose and hurried through car after car.

Through the smoker, the mail coach and the baggage and express.

"Where are you going?" demanded the express agent.

Bob made no answer.

On he went. He leaped on the tender from a door which opened toward it. For Jesse had noticed that every car, even the baggage and express cars, had doors in the ends of them.

When he reached the tender he climbed over the coal and leveling his revolver at the engineer and fireman, cried:

"Hold! Stop her!"

"What?" roared the engineer.

"Stop her, or you are a dead man!"

The frightened engineer quickly reversed his engine.

And as the car stopped dark forms came from the woods, leaped aboard and began robbing the passengers.

Shots were fired to intimidate passengers. But the firing was unnecessary, for no resistance was made.

The great safe in the express was opened and all the money taken from it, then the bandits mounted their horses and bade all a good night and disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.

AT ST. LOUIS.

"Where will you?"

"This way to the omnibus to all parts o' the city."

"Apples, oranges!"

"Mornin' paper, St. Louis 'Republic,' 'Evenin' Star,' 'Sayin's.'"

A perfect hubbub or babel of confused voices reigned about two young men who had just alighted from the incoming train.

"Bob—"

"Where will we go, Charley?"

"That was what I was going to ask."

"Let's go to the Silver Moon."

"Or Moiser."

"It's all the same."

"Do you know the way?"

"Yes."

"Carriage, mister—carriage, carriage?" cried a coachman and hackman anxious to pick up a few pennies.

"No," answered both, indignantly.

"Mister—mister—I say lemme carry your valise."

"I can carry it."

"Carry it for a quarter."

"I can take it."

Then the two young men turned to the left, passed around the great building in which is the depot dining hall, and ascending the stairway on the west, boarded a car.

"Bob."

"What, Charley?" Bob asked as they were going toward Pine street.

"Do you suppose they will recognize us?"

"Who?"

"Police."

"No—why?"
 "I don't know. I feel kind a squeamish every time I see a policeman."
 "Do you? Well, you needn't."
 "Why?"
 "None of them ever saw you before."
 "Yes, but all have read of—"
 "Oh, hush!"

The car in which the Ford Boys were riding had no other occupant.

They were sitting in a corner. The doors were closed, and neither the driver on the front platform, nor the conductor on the rear, could hear what they said.

"Well, Bob, this is a bold move," said Charley Ford.

"Not very."

"Coming right to St. Louis so soon after the robbery."

Bob laughed.

Bob was always the most reckless and daring of the two.

"Jesse will join us soon, and then we will have no trouble," said Bob.

"Paper, mister—Republic—buy a Republic—best paper ever printed."

"Here, how much is it?" Bob Ford asked.

"Er nickel. Take Star Sayings an' Post Dispatch too?"

"Yes."

"Lem me see," said the boy, counting on his fingers.

"Glote, one nickle; Post Despatch, two nickles; Star Sayin's, two pennies—twelve cents."

"Well, I can't make the change. There is a quarter. You may give me back the change next time you see me."

The newsboy fixed his pleased eyes on him in amazement.

"Say, mister, yer must be er little off some way, ain't ye?"

"No," answered Bob.

"Wot yer givin' me seventeen cents fur?"

"Because I've got plenty of money and want to. Now get out of this car or I will give you a dollar."

The boy started, stared suspiciously at the strangers, and hurriedly left the car.

It was really difficult to tell whether he was elated or not at the prospect of having so much money.

"Bob, don't be too lavish."

"Why?" laughed Bob. "It is come easy go easy with us."

"Yes—but if you go to spending too much money it may excite attention."

The car came to Pine street and Twelfth, and turning down the former street, between Seventh and Eighth streets, came to a halt in front of the Silver Moon restaurant and hotel.

Bob and Charley Ford alighted.

As they entered the hotel they saw a group of men in the lobby all talking earnestly.

"It's an outrage on society, Governor," said one.

"I admit it and I shall do my best to put it down," said a large, smooth-shaved man.

"Governor Crittenden, when did you leave Jefferson City?"

"This morning."

Bob Ford turned about and fixed his eyes on Governor Crittenden, who was then the Governor of Missouri.

"Charley!" he whispered.

"What?"

"Wait a moment."

Then as Bob's eyes roamed over the governor he reflected:

"That man is the Governor of the State. He has come to inquire into the affair of the robbery."

What was to be done.

Bob determined to hear what was said.

"Charley, go and register for us."

"Yes."

"Take our baggage to our rooms."

"And then what?"

"Come back here!"

"What are you going to do meanwhile, Bob?"

"I am going to stay here and listen to what they say."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will go."

Charley went to the clerk.

"Register, please," and the clerk whirled the register around for Charley. Charley took up the pen and wrote:

"Charles Winnett."

Then he reflected from what place. After a moment's hesitation he wrote:

"Canton, Missouri."

"Now who shall I say Bob Ford is."

After a few moments reflection he wrote:

"Abel Baum, Kirksville, Mo."

"There, they will not know but that they are genuine," thought Charley.

"Want a room?" asked the clerk.

"Yes."

"Double or single?"

"Double."

"All right, sir."

The clerk took down a key.

Kling went a bell.

A boy came forward.

"Take these gentlemen and baggage up to room 411"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is the other?"

"He is not going up now," Charley explained.

"Is he in the building?"

"Yes, sir."

"Show this one up."

Then the clerk turned about and muttered to himself:

"There seems to be something wrong about those fellows, but I guess they are right."

In the meanwhile Bob Ford was intensely interested.

The Governor of Missouri and a tall, dark-whiskered man had retired into a sort of a little alcove and were conversing in an undertone.

Bob had managed without their seeing him to get behind them, and sitting in a chair with his feet tilted upon a table he apparently was buried in a newspaper though he read not a line.

He was all attention to the conversation between the governor and the tall man whom he made out at last to be chief of police.

"It's an outrage, captain."

"It is, governor."

"And must be broken up."

"I am glad to hear it."

"This last act of the James Boys is audacious."

"And they've got recruits."

"New recruits?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The Fords."

"I don't know them."

"Never heard of them?"

"No."

"Well, they are desperadoes."

"They must be young."

"They are."

"How old?"

"Bob Ford is not over eighteen."

"And the other?"

"Is Charley."

"A brother?"

"Yes."

"Younger?"

"No."

"How much older?"

"Two years."

"These must be a late acquisition to the James Boys' gang?"

"They are."

"How long have they been with them?"

"Not over a year."

"A year?"

"Yes."

"So long?"

"It seems so."

Then came a few moments' silence.

Bob Ford's interest became so intense that he had all he could do not to betray his presence.

At last the silence was broken by the chief of police asking:

"Governor, where are they from?"

"The Fords?"

"Yes."

"Clay county, I believe."

"Clay county?"

"Yes."

"Well, what were they?"

"Before they joined the James Boys' band?"

"Yes."

"Farmer boys."

"Honest?"

"So they seem to have been."

"Perhaps, governor, they were superinduced or persuaded to become outlaws."

"I believe it."

"Jesse and Frank James have a way of enticing young men into crime."

"They are bad men."

"They are, and I intend before my term of governor is over to wipe them out of existence."

Now if these Ford Boys could only be induced to repent."

"Can't they?"

"I believe they can. They are young fellows just entering on a career of crime, and have not yet become case-hardened."

"Perhaps not."

"If they could be made give Jesse away?"

"Governor?"

"What?"

"That's the thing to do."

Just then some one came to call the governor, and the very interesting conversation was broken up.

Charley and Bob went to dinner, and after dinner was over decided to go to the theater.

Joe K. Emmet was then in his prime, and was playing Fritz at the Grand Opera House.

They went to the theater and were highly delighted with the entertainment.

When they came out they started down toward the river front.

This is the first time we have ever been in St. Louis," said Bob, with a laugh. "Let's take in the town."

"All right," Charley answered.

Then they wandered to Almond street.

"Charley, we can get out of this at any time we want to," said Bob.

"We can?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Then Bob told him what he had overheard the governor say.

"Does he mean it?"

"He does."

"Well—"

But before they could say any more, a wild yell went up on the air about them.

They had wandered into a dark street, and half a dozen drunken boatmen, who had been ejected on account of their boisterous conduct from a saloon, now fell in their blind fury upon the Ford Boys.

Bob and Charley laid about them right and left.

The uproar and shouts and yells were heard for blocks around.

The policeman sprang his rattle and hurried to the scene, and ere Bob and Charley Ford could comprehend what was about to occur to them, each was seized by the strong armed officer, and a voice hissed in their ears:

"Out for a lark, are ye, my youngsters? Well, we'll take care o' ye. You'll go to the lock up, and pay a fine, or pound stone for this."

CHAPTER X.

OVER THE BIG BRIDGE.

THE Ford Boys were stunned by their sudden capture.

What should they do?

If they were taken to prison, no doubt they would be discovered.

The large quantity of money they had about them might attract attention.

The policemen clung to them with wonderful tenacity which forbade their making any effort at escape.

Other policemen were hurrying forward and already quite a posse had gathered about.

"What's the row here, officer Holland?" asked a sergeant of police, hurrying forward at the head of a dozen men.

"Some young bloods were on a racket," said the officer.

"Were they?"

"Yes."

"And you hauled them in?"

"Yes, we got five of them."

"We were doing no wrong," said Bob Ford.

"You wasn't, warn't ye?" asked a policeman.

"No."

"Didn't I see ye fight?"

"Yes—but in defense."

"Nonsense."

"It's true, sergeant."

"Ha, ha, I would like to see you make Sergeant Prince believe anything when we say it isn't so."

"Release us, please."

"No, we don't please to do so."

"You don't?"

Bob's eyes flashed dangerously.

"We don't."

He felt his indignation rising within him to such an extent that he could scarce restrain himself from making a desperate effort for liberty.

There were a brace of deadly revolvers in his belt, and he would have only to draw them and play havoc among the police.

But could he escape?

He was in a great city. They were but two, and already a dozen policeman were all about them.

Others were coming, and a whistle or the rattle of a single club would call a hundred.

"It's no use," thought Bob; "we would only be shot down, and that would end it."

But to be taken to the station and examined would certainly be equally perilous.

He and Charlie stood side by side. They were surrounded by police, and there was such a constant jabbering and hubbub going on all around them that they could not hear what the boys said to each other.

The three drunken, roystering boatmen who had been captured were making the night hideous with their yells and protestations of innocence.

"Charley!" Bob whispered.

He succeeded in arresting his brother's attention without the police knowing it.

"What, Bob?"

"What had we better do?"

"Submit."

"It's dangerous."

"What else can we do?"

"Resist."

"That's death."

"Better death than capture if——"

"Well, there's a hope," interrupted Charley.

A score of policemen were on hand by this time.

The drunken, bolsterous fellows were led away hooting, yelling and singing toward the station. Only the Ford Brothers remained.

"Bob!" whispered Charley.

"What?"

"Let's try to buy off."

"That's it," thought Bob.

Then he plucked the policeman nearest him aside and said:

"Can I speak with you?"

"Certainly."

"Now, sir, we are not bad fellows."

"Oh, they all say that."

"We are not very bad. We were never arrested before in our lives."

"That's the old, old story."

"But I am telling the truth."

"Same old gag."

"Look at us and you will see at a glance that we are not city men."

"No, I know that."

"We are not toughs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we are just in the city for the first time in our lives, and it would break the hearts of our parents to know that we had been locked up."

"Would it?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you think of that before you started out to paint the town vermilion?"

"Now, officer, I am willing to do the fair thing with you if you will let me."

"What is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"Money."

"Do you mean to bribe me?" cried the officer, indignantly. "If that is your little game, I just want to tell you it can't be done."

"Oh, no, no, no."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I merely wanted to put up ten or twenty dollars with you for our appearance at court tomorrow."

"That's equivalent to a bribe."

"No, sir, I would come."

"You'll come now."

Bob Ford found that all efforts to get away were unavailing, and their situation was becoming alarming.

He was taken back to his brother Charley and both were told that they would have to go to prison.

"Won't it work, Bob," Charley asked in a whisper.

"No."

"What'll we do now?"

"Submit."

"Couldn't resist?"

"No, it's too late now."

Then the policemen came to them and the sergeant said:

"Well, boys, are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" Bob asked.

"To go to the station."

"No."

"What have you to do first?"

"To live a lifetime."

It was only a grim joke, and the officers smiled.

"Bring them on, Holland."

The officers started, but had not gone far before they were met by two more policemen.

"Hold!" said one of them.

"What's wrong?"

"The captain sent us to see you."

"To see us?" asked the sergeant.

"Yes."

"Why—on what business?"

Then one of the new comers whispered a few words to the officer.

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, will you two take them and we'll go back and attend to that?"

"Have you ironed them?"

"Yes—both have been handcuffed together and though they were armed, neither could use a weapon."

"Then we can take them safely," said one of the new policeman.

"Oh, yes, they are not dangerous."

"Little did the officers dream who they were dealing with. Had they known that those two men were members of the James Boys' band, they would not have said they were not dangerous."

The officers who had the Ford Boys in charge turned them over to the new comers and started down the street, when one of the new comers, a large, broad shouldered man, whose form was incased in a well fitting blue coat and who wore a policeman's helmet on his head, called to them:

"Hold a moment!"

"Well, what now?"

"Let us have the key?"

"What key?"

"To the handcuffs."

"Certainly. You will want to take them off."

Then he handed over the keys and the Ford Boys in charge of the new guards and started away.

They knew not whither they were going, and having little hope now of escape, their hearts sunk within them.

Their new guards turned into a dark alley and followed it for some time until they suddenly said:

"Halt."

All was now utter darkness.

"This way, be careful, Bob," said one of the policeman in a whisper.

"Bob—what do you know——"

"Hush," said the officer in a whisper. "If you have any regard for your safety, you will keep quiet."

Then to his utter amazement the officer said:

"Let me unlock you and you can go easier."

With the key, he removed the handcuffs and added:

"Now come down in this basement building."

They followed him.

There was something in the voice of the man which was strangely familiar to the Ford Boys.

They were conducted down a steep flight of narrow steps, through a dark corridor and found themselves in a small room.

One of the officers turned up the gas which was burning dimly and the room was lighted.

"Sit down, Bob, sit down, Charley," said the officer.

They did so.

The officer laid aside his helmet, his wig and false whiskers and before them stood Jesse James.

"Jesse James?" cried Bob and Charley in a breath starting to their feet.

"S—hl keep quiet," said Jesse. "You must ever be cool. Now how did you get in that scrape? Tell me the truth, for I will be sure to learn it sooner or later."

"We were simply going down the street when we were attacked by a gang of drunken sailors," said Bob. "That is all we know."

"Well, young men, you must learn a lesson by this."

"Why are you here, Jesse, and how did you come to be on the police force, and who—why this other man is Frank James!"

"Yes."

"Well, I am amazed."

"It would all be simple enough if you could understand it, Bob, but at present we will not explain. Now you two must leave St. Louis for a day or two."

"Are you two going to leave also?"

"No; not for a few days. We've got some work to do."

"Where must we go?" asked Bob.

"Across the big bridge."

"Into Illinois?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At once."

"This night?"

"This hour."

"But our luggage?"

"It's at the hotel."

"Yes."

"I'll get it."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"But won't we be in great danger of being discovered?"

"No."

Then from inside pockets of their coats the pseudo police took small packages, which proved on examination to contain each a wig and pair of gray whiskers.

Both were disguised in a few moments, so that they could not have been known by their own grandmother.

"Now go."

So the Ford Boys issued forth, went to Washington avenue and, boarding a street car, crossed the great bridge over into Illinois.

CHAPTER XI.

BACK TO MISSOURI.

WHEN the street car reached East St. Louis and stopped there, the Ford Boys got out of it and then Bob said:

"Well, Charley, what will we do now?"

"The night is more than half spent, Bob."

"Yes."

"I am sleepy."

"So am I."

"Let's go the hotel."

"All right."

"Come on."

They went a short distance when they heard a darky singing:

"We's gwine to de shuckin' o' de corn,

Yes, we's a gwine to de shuckin' o' de corn—"

"Hello, Sambo!" called Bob.

"I ain't Sambo."

"Who are you?"

"Pompey."

"Well, Pompey, where is the nearest tavern?"

"D'yer mean hotel, boss?"

"Yes."

"Golly, dat's mine zactly."

"Are you a runner for a hotel?"

"Bet I iz. Come right erlong."

"How far is it?"

"Tain't far. Be dar soon."

"Well, lead on."

"Come on."

The negro led them down a narrow, dirty street and brought up at a great, gloomy, forsaken-looking store-house.

It stood in the worst part of town.

"Heah you iz, boss."

They entered the hotel by a great, old-fashioned, heavy oaken door, which was open.

Inside in the far distance, lighted by a candle which burned low in its socket, was a clerk's desk, and behind it a shock-headed fellow of twenty-five asleep.

"Say, Jimmy, Jimmy, wake up, won't yer?"

"No, I won't!"

"Golly, yer will."

"Go away, an' let me alone, or I'll bust yer crust!" growled the sleepy clerk, who, sitting in a chair, leaned over on the desk and slept.

"No, ye won't, Jimmy."

"Go away."

"Heah's two gemmans come to stay all night, an' dey want a bed, Jimmy."

"Where are they?" asked Jimmy, raising a bloated, sleepy-looking face, and glaring at Bob and Charley.

"Here we are," said Bob.

"What d'yer want?"

"A bed."

"Fur two?"

"Yes."

"Hain't got but one bed. Here, Pomp, take 'em ter Number 69."

He handed the negro a key, and soon was snoring over his desk.

"Come on, boss," said Pomp, as with the key he hurried up an old rickety stairway which was utterly barren of carpet or any kind of covering.

They were ushered into a strange dark dismal looking apartment. The walls were blackened. The paper in many places had been pulled off.

There was an old musty carpet on the floor, and the furniture was all old and dilapidated.

A great broad fireplace was in the room with a wide old fashioned chimney.

It was evident that the fireplace had not been used for a long time.

For a moment Bob gazed at their surroundings, and then dismissed the negro.

"We will now go to bed," he said to Charley.

"It's not a very inviting bed, Bob."

"No."

"And Bob—did you notice that nigger?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever see such a face?"

"I never saw a more villainous face."

"He is a thief."
 "A thug."
 "One would hardly care to sleep here."
 "We can sleep one at a time."
 Bob yawned.
 Charley yawned.
 "Let's go to bed."
 "All right," here we go."
 Both went to bed. There was but one bed, it was wide and hard, evidently the mattress was boards.
 "Bob do you want to sleep in front?"
 "Yes."
 "Very well—put your pistols under your head."
 "I will."
 "When both were in bed, Bob remarked:
 "It's not a very good bed, Charley, but it is much better than the jail."
 "Yes—Bob."
 "What?"
 "Is the door locked?"
 "No."
 "Get up and lock it."
 Bob, who was very sleepy, climbed out of the bed and went to the door.
 "There is no key to it, Charley."
 "Isn't there?"
 "No."
 "Look outside."
 "I have."
 "Put a chair under the knob and press it closed."
 Bob did so.
 "There, no one could get in without us knowing it," said Bob.
 He went back to the bed and climbed in.
 "Now, Charley, we must only one sleep at a time."
 "That's best."
 "Who will sleep first?"
 "I don't care."
 "You may, Charley."
 "All right. How long shall I sleep?"
 "Until daylight."
 "And you?"
 "I will sleep until noon."
 This matter being settled Charley soon fell asleep.

Bob Ford left the candle burning in the room, and as he lay there gazing into the great fireplace and dark chimney he could not repress some strange feelings of awe which came over him.

There was something so strange, we might almost say wonderful, in the fire-place.

But anon Bob's eyes grew heavy, and in spite of himself they closed.

Two or three times he opened them and gazed at the chimney.

But there was nothing about the broad, old black fire-place that was actually suspicious, save its quaint and curious make. Its vast width and depth.

His eyes again closed, and despite his resolution to keep awake he was almost asleep when he woke with a start.

What was it?

Could it be possible that he saw a man's head in the fire-place.

Was that a head or was he dreaming?

The head, if he saw one, was hanging down from the chimney and peeping at him under the arch.

But on opening his eyes wide and starting up in bed, Bob saw nothing but the vast black space in the chimney.

"It was only a dream!" he thought.

"What's the matter Bob?" asked Charley, who was awakened by Bob's sudden start.

"I was dreaming, Charley, that was all."

"Dreaming. Have you been asleep?"

"I guess I was."

"On guard?"

"I'll not do it again. Go to sleep, Charley."

In a few minutes Charley again snored.

Bob Ford was not quite certain that he slept when he saw the head in the chimney.

"I half believe it was real," he said.

Then he quietly drew a pistol from under his head, and with one eye closed, watched the chimney place.

Down below the great arch he saw something lowering itself.

It was a woolly head, coming down head first.

Then a pair of baleful black eyes.

"Golly, dey sleeps dis time."

It was Pomp who was letting himself down the chimney head first.

His head and shoulders were down far enough for Bob to see that he held a great, murderous-looking knife in his right hand.

Then the villainous face of the darky was contracted in a most hideous grin, as he said:
 "Golly, dey's boif got money. I'll do it, an'

drop 'em in de chimney, an' nobody won't nebber know it. Jimmy war too drunk to remember dat dey ebber come here at all."

For some cause, the head, shoulders and arms of the negro were again drawn up into the chimney out of sight of Bob Ford.

The plan of the negro was now quite evident. It was his intention to kill the white men, rob them, and drop their bodies in that old chimney, which yawned like an enormous cavern of death to receive them.

Their bodies might lie there ages before they would be discovered.

It puzzled Bob a little at first to know how their would-be assassin got in the chimney, but when he remembered that an old fashioned crane hung way up in its capacious throat and reflected that by aid of a rope an active negro could go up or down in the chimney with head up or down at will, and peek in at every room to which a fire-place had been made.

Bob quietly cocked his revolver and laid it beside his pillow, and pulled the cover up over it so that only the tip of the muzzle protruded.

He left an open space along the barrel for him to sight it, and with his finger on the trigger waited for the appearance again of the negro.

He had not long to wait.

Scarce had he got himself in good position when the woolly head again appeared.

The wicked eyes now gleamed like living coals of fire, and the grinning teeth had something about them that was hideous.

Bob waited until the head was down and the arm holding the knife.

He could see the rope with which Pomp was lowering himself.

The negro had begun to turn himself in the chimney for the purpose of getting at his intended victim, when—

Bang!

Loud and deafening rang the report.

The shot awoke Charley.

There came neither groan nor cry from Pomp. At the crack of the pistol he let go of his hold on the rope and plunged head first down into the chimney.

The knife which he carried in his hand, no doubt with such deadly intent, slipped from his grasp and fell with a jingling sound on the hearth within the room, while Pomp disappeared down the main flue of the chimney.

"Bob—Bob! what is it?" asked Charley, starting up with his revolver.

"No danger now, Charley."

"What was it?"

"A nigger."

"Did you shoot him?"

"Don't know, but think I did."

Bob leaped to his feet and ran to the fire-place.

He stood up in it and peeped over the back jamb down into the great dark flue, but all was silent as the grave.

Charley, who was still mystified, demanded to know what it all meant.

Bob coolly picked up the knife which Pomp had dropped, and holding it up, said:

"This is a dangerous looking weapon."

"Yes."

"But it don't belong to either one of us."

"No."

"Charley?"

"Well?"

"Get up and dress."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Missouri. We can't leave Illinois any too soon."

The Ford Boys rapidly dressed and hurried from the house.

The clerk was still sleeping over the desk, so without waiting for any such trifling preliminaries as paying bills they hurried from the house.

Day had begun to dawn. They went down to the river and found a fisherman getting out his boat.

"How much will you charge to cross us over below the city?" asked Bob.

"Five dollars."

"Get in, Charley, and we'll go."

They took their places in the boat and were rowed over into Missouri, landing below Canandaigua, and started out in the country.

Once more they were in Missouri.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BROTHERS MAKE A STAND.

THREE days later two young men mounted on thoroughbred horses were galloping along a wooded road a few miles northwest of St. Louis. Suddenly there loomed up before them a man.

There is nothing so very uncommon in meeting a man on a country road, but there was

something alarmingly uncommon about this man. He was on foot, standing in the middle of the road and held a double-barreled shot-gun to his shoulder.

"Halt!" he cried.

The two young horsemen came to a halt.

There could be no question but that he meant the command for them, for the double-barreled gun was pointed at them.

They were near enough to see that it was cocked and that he had both fingers on the triggers.

"What do you mean?" asked Bob Ford, for the two young men on horseback were the Ford Boys.

"Surrender!" cried the man with the shot-gun.

"Surrender?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that both of us shall surrender?" asked Bob, whose horse kept prancing about, and Bob's right hand at the same time fell on the butt of a revolver.

"I think I do."

"Who shall we surrender to?"

"The sheriff o' this county."

"Are you the sheriff?"

"No—I am his deputy."

Never was there a more stupid-looking pair than Bob and Charlie Ford at this moment.

They seemed not to comprehend what the man said.

"What have you got to do with us?" Bob asked.

"Arrest you."

"Arrest me?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Stealin'."

"What have I stole?"

"The horse you ride."

"You are mistaken, man. I never saw you before."

"And I never saw you before."

"Then I would like to know how you know I stole this horse?"

"That horse belonged to Arthur Bellzer."

"You are mistaken."

"I am not."

"It was another like him."

"It was not. Stand where you are and I will call the sheriff, who will show you his warrant for arresting you."

But the Ford Boys had no notion of waiting for the sheriff.

Crack!

Crack!

Just as the deputy put his whistle to his lips to call the sheriff both Bob and Charley fired.

One of the bullets struck the barrel of the gun and though the bullet did not even wound the deputy, it stunned him a little and caused him to stagger.

"Down on him, Charley!" whispered Bob.

Before the smoke had cleared away from their pistols, and before the echoes of the shots had ceased to reverberate among the hills, Charley and Bob Ford clapped spurs to their steeds and dashed like thunderbolts on the confused, stunned deputy.

"Down you go!" yelled Bob, as his flying horse struck the deputy and sent him head over heels at the roadside.

"Hark, away!"

"Come down to it, Ned."

Their horses sped like thunderbolts along the road.

Every since they had stolen the horses the night before from a hitch-rack at a country church they had been closely pursued.

It was the only time they had been run so close.

Now they found themselves so completely hemmed in that they were forced to break through, for the sheriff's deputies had headed them off.

"Slacken speed, Bob," said Charley.

"We are not out of danger yet, Charley."

"I know it."

"Then why slacken speed?"

"So as not to run our horses down."

"All right."

"Did we break that deputy's neck?"

"I think not."

"It was a close shave for us."

"It was."

"Once or twice I almost felt his buckshot in my back."

"He didn't call the sheriff."

"No, but we did."

"How?"

"Our shots."

"Yes—of course those shots were heard and

the sheriff and his deputies will soon be hard on our heels."

The Ford Boys were now traveling in a portion of the country that was devoid of railroads and telegraphs.

There were no means whereby they could head off the fugitives, and Bob and Charley had tested their horses enough to know that they could travel as far in a day as any horses, and that for speed and endurance they perhaps had no superior.

They traveled on until noon, when they halted at a house.

"Can you give us some dinner at once, and feed our horses?" Bob asked.

"Yes," said the farmer.

"All right; be quick."

"Dinner is waitin'."

"Well, I think so ter look at yer horses. All drippin' wet with sweat."

"Hello, pop," cried one of the girls. "Here came a lot o' men."

"Bob?"

"Charley!"

"To horse."

There was a clatter of hoofs.

The Ford Boys leaped to their horses.

"In the house, if you value your lives," cried Bob.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

It seemed as if the air was full of buckshot.

The shot rattled against the fence, cut the leaves from the cherry trees, and whizzed thick as hail about the Ford Boys.

The Ford Boys were leaving their foes far behind, when suddenly, as they galloped over a hill, they were greeted by a shout and saw a score of pursuers before them.

"We are headed off!" cried Charley.

"Surrounded!"

"What can we do?"

"Make a stand."

"All right. We will die right here. It is as good a spot as any to die in."

Then they dismounted to make one last grand stand.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RIDGE HILL TRAGEDY.

It often happens that deliverance comes just at the last moment.



At this moment wild yells arose on the air behind the two horsemen, who, dust-covered and haggard from their long flight, were galloping up a dusty road. "Do you hear that, Jesse?" "Yes."

"Bring it here."

"In the yard?"

"Yes; spread a table under this tree."

"And your horses?"

"Feed 'em."

"Put 'em in the barn?"

"No."

"Where?"

"There is a bough by the gate."

"Feed 'em there?"

"Yes."

The Ford Boys dismounted and took the bits from the horses' mouths, but did not remove the saddles.

There was some water in a trough, and they let the horses drink.

Two red-headed girls brought out a table and placed it under a locust tree and spread a cloth.

In five minutes the Ford Boys were eating their dinners, and their horses were eating their oats.

"Where be you men goin'?" asked the farmer suspiciously.

"To Clay county."

"Clay county?"

"Yes."

"Rld hard, I guess."

"Rather," Bob answered.

"Are you hit, Bob?"

"No—are you, Charley?"

"No."

"It's a wonder."

"Hurry. Hurry!"

"I can't get this confounded bit in his mouth."

"Why?"

"It has stuck."

But after another trial Bob got the bit in his horse's mouth. In the meanwhile, Bob had brought his horse around so as to make a breast-work of him, and had opened fire on the enemy who were approaching up the hill.

"Are you all right now, Bob?"

"Yes."

"Mount."

Bob vaulted into the saddle.

"Hark, away."

Down the road they thundered.

"There they go—there they go!" roared a chorus of voices in their rear.

Then the thunder of hoofs in pursuit sounded like the crack of doom. The very earth trembled.

"We'll have 'em—we'll have 'em!" cried the sheriff, who led the pursuit.

"What do they mean?" Bob asked.

"I don't know," said Charley.

But they soon were to know.

It was true in this case.

The Ford Boys had just abandoned all hope, and with grim determination had prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible, when from the hills above them there came a tremendous yell.

It was the old guerrilla war whoop which so often startled the night air during the war.

It was a screech more terrible than any Indian ever gave utterance to.

"Look, Bob."

"See, Charley?"

"It's Jess."

"And Frank."

"Jim Cummins and all the band."

"We are rescued."

"Hurrah, hurrah!"

"See, they scatter the posse right and left."

So they did.

With rein in their teeth and a pistol in each hand the banditti pursued the deputies, pouring in a volley of pistol shots which would remind an old soldier of a line of battle.

"Weil, boys, had a close call, didn't you?" asked Jesse James, as he galloped up to where Bob and Charley Ford were.

"Rather," Bob answered.

"What were you going to do if we hadn't come?"

"Fight."
 "And surrender?"
 "No, fight and die."
 "That's right, Bob," cried Jesse, taking Bob's hand. "Now you talk as if you were really made of the right stuff."
 "We are."
 "I am glad to have such men."
 "What's the use of surrendering, Jesse James? To surrender means death."
 "Of course it does."
 "And if I am going to die I prefer the bullet to the rope."
 This was a doctrine which Jesse James took great care to inculcate in his men.
 "Better die fighting like men than be hung up like dogs," was his motto, which he never lost an opportunity to impress on their minds.

"Away from here. The sheriff will raise the militia, I suspect, and make it rather warm in this part of the country."
 "Yes."
 "Come on."
 The cavalcade wheeled their horses about and galloped down the road.
 Then they traveled all day and until late in the night without any incident worthy of mention.
 When night came Jesse halted his band in the wood and held a few moments' consultation.
 "Say, boys, what shall we do?" he asked.
 "Shall we spend the night in the woods or go to a house?"
 "Dare we go to a house?" asked Bob.
 "Yes."
 "What house?"

Then it seemed as if a whole kennel of the noisy brutes had suddenly been turned loose and came running yelping and howling.
 Jesse, dismounting, said:
 "George must sleep sound if these creatures won't wake him."
 "Where are you going, Jess?" Frank asked.
 "To the house."
 "Have a care."
 "There is no danger."
 "There may be. You take too many risks."
 "You are growing to be a coward, Frank."
 "No, I am not."
 "Yes. Then why are you so cautious?"
 "Prudence is not cowardice," Frank responded.
 "I am sick of hearing that forever."
 "Well, be prudent."



"Jesse James, you are my prisoner." "Carl Green!" "Surrender." "Crack!" "Crack!" Two pistol shots rang out in quick succession.

Jesse placed a tube to his lips and sounded a blast.
 "That will call in the stragglers from the pursuit."
 "Will they kill any of them?" Charlie Ford asked.
 "Well, they may," Jesse answered, with a laugh.
 "Isn't it better not to shed blood if it can be helped?"
 "Oh, yes."
 "Well, it's not necessary now."
 "The boys have a big mad on, and if they should run on to any of the sheriff's deputies now I couldn't answer for the consequences. Truth of the matter is, such fellows ought to stay at their homes and not be following dangerous men over the country."
 "Here come the boys."
 "Jim Cummins?"
 "I am here."
 "Dick Little?"
 "Me, too."
 "Wood Hite?"
 "I am here also."
 "Ed McMillan?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, now we will go."
 "Where?"

"George Spencer's house is not far from here."
 "Who is he?"
 "One of Quantrell's old guard."
 "Can you trust him?"
 "Trust him?"
 "Yes, dare you trust him?"
 "Ha, ha, ha, you know but very little of Quantrell's old guard, not to know that every member of it can be trusted."
 "I don't know whether it can be trusted or not!"
 "Because you did not serve with Quantrell."
 "No, I was too young."
 "So you were."
 "Well, Jesse, if we can trust him, if you are quite sure Spencer won't betray us, we will go."
 "All right."
 Then Jesse wheeled Siroc about and cried:
 "Come on, boys."
 The entire cavalcade was soon galloping through the woods like madmen.
 They drew close to a large commodious farmhouse, and Jesse called:
 "Helloa!"
 Dogs barked.
 "Helloa!"
 Dogs barked still more furiously.

"Here, Bob, hold Siroc. I will see what ails George."
 "If you find the house filled with detectives—" began Frank James, as Jesse handed the rein to Bob Ford.
 "There will be a fight, that's all," interrupted Jesse.
 Jesse boldly opened the gate and entered the yard.
 The dogs came leaping and howling toward him.
 They jumped up about him; they snapped at his hands.
 "Get out!" cried Jesse.
 Then he administered kicks which sent the dogs yelping right and left.
 Jesse in this manner reached the door, and rapped on it with his knuckles.
 There was no answer.
 He thumped louder with his fist.
 Then an old head, covered with a nightcap, was poked out of the window above, and a shrill, cracked voice cried:
 "What yer want?"
 "Where is George Spencer?"
 "Not at hum."
 "Who are you?"
 "His mother."
 "Where is George?"

"He'n his wife air gone ter Colaway county."
 "When did they go?"
 "Yisterday."
 "Are you all the person at home?"
 "Me an' Billy, ther hired boy."
 Jesse James then turned about and returned to his men.

"He's not here."
 "What are you going to do?"
 "I don't know."
 "Why not sleep in the barn?" suggested Bob.
 "That's the very idea, Bob Ford."
 They went to the barn, and slept until daylight.

They were near the Clay county line, and next day reached it.

Clay county was regarded as a place of refuge. "One of the James Boys was never molested in the county," became an old adage, from the number of friends they had.

Once in Clay they disbanded.

Bob and Charley Ford, who nearly always went together, went to the house of a man named Wells.

Old Dave Wells was known to be a warm friend and admirer of the banditti.

"An' so ye've joined the James Boys, hev' ye?" said Wells.

"Yes."

"I don't blame ye. It's a mighty sight easier than workin' this ground. The grounds, too, have ter sprout peas."

They had been here about a week when the Ford Boys received a note, which said:

"Come to Rich Hill."

"Jesse."

"What does it mean, Charley?"

"Don't know, Bob."

"He wants us there."

"Yes—and let's go."

Then they called to Mr. Wells.

"What d'yer want?" asked Wells, who was shaving hoops near the house.

"How far is it to Rich Hill?"

"Ter Rich Hill?"

"Yes."

"Wall, lemme see. Reckin it air erbout twelve, fifteen, may be twenty miles. Why?"

"We are going there."

"When?"

"Now."

"Right now—wait till mornin', won't yer?"

"No—we will go to-night."

"I'd better go an' tell the old woman ter git yer authin' ter eat."

While supper was being looked for the Ford Boys spent the time in currying their horses and rubbing them down, feeding them, and seeing that they were in prime condition for a long ride.

The distance was more nearly twenty-five miles than twenty, as the boys learned ere they got to Rich Hill.

It was past midnight, and the little town was wrapt in slumber.

It was an inland town, several miles from any railroad, but boasted of one bank.

That bank was the cause of the gathering of the James Boys.

As the Ford Brothers rode into the village, a voice called:

"Halt!"

"Hello, who are you?" asked Bob.

"Quantrell."

"All right."

Quantrell was the password. The James Boys then gathered about Bob and Charley.

"You are just in time, boys," said Jesse.

"Dismount and we'll do the work."

"What are you going to do, Jesse?" Bob asked.

"Blow open a safe."

"A safe?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think burglary was in your line."

"It's not exactly, but we've got an expert."

"Who?"

"Jake West, from New York."

"The burglar?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now what's been done?"

"Jake is in the bank now, has cut the hole in the safe and is putting in the fuse."

The bank was in a small brick building which stood on a corner of the street. They went to it and could hear a low dull:

Click!

Click!

Click! as the cautious burglar cut his way into the iron door.

Then he set the charge and crawled out of the window hurriedly.

"Pull the window down, get out of the way and watch!" he whispered.

Then came a scampering in every direction.

A few moments' awful silence and follow a low muffled, rumbling report which had been partly smothered by the cautious burglar.

They waited a little longer to see if it would be heard, if any one would come to the bank. But no one came.

Then the banditti hurried forward.

West and Jesse James entered the bank.

There lay the safe broken into fragments.

By the aid of a dark lantern they saw the money boxes and drawers and proceeded to empty them.

"Come now, let's away from here," whispered Jesse James.

"Have we all the money?"

"Yes."

"Come."

West leaped out of the window.

Jesse went to the door, which at this moment was flung open by an excited man, the banker.

"What does this mean?" cried the banker.

"Ho, who are you? Thieves, help, murder!" He seized Jesse James.

But it was the last act of his life.

Quick, sure and swift as the lightning's flash leaped the knife of Jesse James from its scabbard into the breast of the banker and the banditti hurried away leaving him dead across his own threshold.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE AFFAIR AT LEE'S SUMMIT.

THREE weeks after the Ridge Hill tragedy a young man arrived at Lee's Summit.

He was a prepossessing young fellow, with a frank, open countenance, and when he went to Mr. Willis Harlan's store and applied for the position of clerk, he was thought to be just what he represented himself, a plain young man from Kansas City.

"Did you advertise for a salesman?" asked the new-comer.

"Yes," answered Harlan, somewhat sleepily.

"Well, I am here to take the place."

"Yes."

"Do you want a clerk?"

Willis Harlan was a man addicted to drinking, and on this special morning was more than half seas over.

He looked sleepily at the young man and answered:

"Yes."

"Well, employ me, won't you?"

"Do you think you'll do?"

"Of course, or I should not have applied."

"Have been expecting some clerks from home, but they haven't come—where's Fred?" Willis asked of a young man who was in his store.

"Out under the shed, drunk."

"Oh, that boy Fred will never amount to anything," said Harlan.

"He's just like his father," answered the young fellow at a short distance away, folding up some goods which a lady customer had caused him to take down.

All the while the applicant for the position was standing patiently awaiting Harlan's decision.

Harlan tied up a little parcel of something and put it away.

"I came in answer to your advertisement," said the new applicant; "now I want to know if you are going to accept me or not."

"I guess I'll try you."

"All right. When shall I commence?"

"Right now."

In two hours the new applicant was employed.

He served Harlan quite faithfully for the remainder of the day.

At night when the store had closed and all business had suspended, the new clerk from Harlan's might have been seen slowly making his way toward a dense wood close to the town of Lee's Summit.

"Well, I wonder if he'll be there to night or will I have to come again, again and again."

A shudder ran through the frame of the speaker as he said to himself:

"This is no ordinary risk I am running. There are a thousand dangers encircling me."

Harlan's new clerk was none other than Bob Ford in disguise.

Of course Bob Ford had a deep object in playing the role of clerk.

If the reader will just follow us for a few pages further he will learn what that purpose was.

Bob soon reached the densest, darkest part of the wood.

He came to a halt and placing a whistle to his lips blew a keen blast.

It went echoing through the woods.

Then all became silent.

"He hasn't come," thought Bob.

No.

Then there came from far across the hills an answering blast.

"Ay, he is there!"

Then Bob hurried down into the ravine, and went toward the place from whence the signal came.

"Aha!" cried a voice.

Bob stopped.

"Whist!"

"Ay, ay!"

"Who are you?"

"A friend to the faithful."

"Counter—"

"Sign."

"Quant—"

"Reli."

There could be no doubt after such a complete exchange of countersigns that they were the individuals of the same band.

"Bob!"

"Jesse!"

The chief and the bandit met and grasped each others hand.

"Sit, down, Bob."

Both sat down upon a moss covered stone.

"Well, you came, Bob?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Did you get the place?"

"Yes."

"Any trouble?"

"No."

"What kind of a man is Harlan?"

"A drunken old idiot."

"Well, he don't suspect?"

"No. He is almost an imbecile."

"Well, Bob, I want you to set to your work at once."

"I will, as soon as I learn what it is."

"That's what I am here for."

"To tell me?"

"Of course."

"Are your designs against Harlan?"

"No."

"I thought not. He has nothing worth bothering about."

"No, I suppose not."

"Who are you after?"

"Old Peter Pryor."

"Pete Pryor—who is he?"

"The miser."

"Oh, yes—I've heard of him, I believe. Don't he live in Lee's Summit?"

"No. He lives in the country somewhere, in a miserable old shanty."

"Has old Pete much money?"

"Much money! Well, I should remark, Bob. That old fellow has somewhere buried in the earth or hidden in the rocks at least a half a million of dollars."

"So much?"

"Not a cent less."

"Have you that on good authority?"

"The best. Now we have tried old Pete in three or four ways. We have tortured him and threatened him and hung him. But you might burn him at the stake and you would not get a word out of him. He will die before he will reveal his treasure."

"Well, how am I to get at his secret?"

"By strategy."

"How?"

"He has a hobby."

"What is it?"

"Bugs."

"Bugs!" cried Bob in astonishment, and half inclined to believe that the great bandit king was making a jest of him.

"Yes, bugs. He is a scientist."

"And studies bugs?"

"Yes, entomology is his hobby. Now get on to it."

"How can I? I don't know anything of insects."

"Be a student."

"Oh, yes, suddenly desirous of learning."

"Yes."

"Well, I will try."

"Do it."

"He has not shown up yet."

"Well, he will before long. When he comes in get into conversation with him and his hobby, and get yourself invited to look at his entomological specimens, and then watch him."

After a few moments Bob said:

"I don't really see my way clear to his revealing his treasure."

"He'll never do it. But when you get to studying bugs and insects, then the old fellow will like you. You will always be a welcome visitor, and if you are found at odd hours and times watching him, you will not be suspected of anything wrong."

"No."

"You can make yourself a spy on him and before many months you will shadow him to his hidden treasure; then the rest is easy."

Bob Ford now had the complete lay out.

He went back to the store to his work. Almost a week elapsed, when one day a little old man with a bad hacking cough and dressed shabbily entered the store.

"Got any Kaintucky Jeans?" he asked.

"Yes," Bob answered. He pulled down the cloth.

"How much air it wuth?"

"Fifty cents per yard."

"Oh, dear, it's too much. I can't afford ter spend so much money."

"Why not?"

"I'm pore."

"Let me see, are you Mr. Pryor?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Roger Pryor?"

"Yes."

"I have heard of you."

"I'm a beggar. I don't see how ye ever come ter hear o' sich a pore feller as me."

"I've heard you had a big collection of insects."

"Oh, did ye?"

"Yes."

"I have."

"A big collection?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see them."

"Would ye?"

"Yes, I am something of an entomologist myself."

The result was that Bob was invited to the old man's house.

Bob had the happy faculty of a great many people of talking about that which he knew very little without revealing his ignorance.

He soon made the old miser believe he was greatly interested in entomology.

When he had fully ingratiated himself in the good graces of the old man he became almost a constant visitor.

Shrewd indeed did Bob manage the affair.

He neglected the store, and Harlan discharged him, but that was what he wanted.

He carried his complaint to Pryor, and asked to be permitted to stay at his house until he could get another position.

The permission was granted.

Then he watched the old man day and night.

One night when it was thought that Bob slept old Pryor rose and went to a cliff.

Bob followed and saw him pull some stones out from a small grotto.

"Aha, my treasure, yer here yet. Yer better'n bugs or science. Nobody dreams I've got half a million here."

That was enough. Next day Bob left the neighborhood.

A week later Bob and Jesse James and Frank James crept to the miser's house from the road.

Pryor slept.

"This way," whispered Bob.

He led them to the cliff.

They at once began to pull out the loose stones.

The treasure was drawn out. Boxes, bags and heaps of gold.

A wild yell and the old miser is among them, fighting like a madman.

Jesse's hand seizes his throat, and the old man falls.

He kicks spasmodically for a few moments and all is still.

Next morning the old crazy entomologist was found hanging to the eave of his log house by a rope, and the coroner's jury returned a verdict of suicide.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD MAN HAYES.

MOLLIE HAYES was again hanging on the gate looking with a longing eye up the great dusty road just as she had stood and looked up the road so long ago.

The sun was setting and she seemed to be wishing other than expecting that he would come.

"Poor Bob!" she sighed, and her pretty blue eyes grew moist and dim.

Some one was coming from down the road.

She looked again.

It was not Bob. It was only her old father.

The old farmer's frame was bent beneath the toil of many years.

"What are you standin' here for, Mollie?" he asked, as he found his daughter still lingering at the gate.

"Oh, father, I am tired."

"Then go in the house."

"I am tired of the house."

"You look as if ye was waitin' for some un."

"I am."

"Who?"

"You."

"Ah, well, Mollie, give yer old father a kiss an' run in the house."

At this moment three horsemen came over the hill.

The sun had set, and it required even the keen eyes of Mollie Hayes to make out their forms against the dark sky.

"Some one is coming, father."

"Where, child?"

"Over the hill."

"Oh, I don't see 'em."

"I do."

"Yes, so do I now. Why, lemme see, ain't it three men?"

"Yes."

"On hoss back?"

"Yes."

"Wall, guess they're some neighbors goin' home from town. Come in, Mollie."

Mollie and her father started in the house, and had just reached the door when the three men came to the gate and drew rein.

"Go in, Mollie. Them fellers look ez if they was goin' to stop."

"So they are, papa."

Mollie paused at the door as three old men, all with white hair and beard, drew rein in front of the house.

"Hello!" said the largest man in a cracked voice.

"Hello, sir," answered Mr. Hayes, going to the fence.

"Are you the owner o' the house?"

"I am."

"It's a gittin' late."

"Rather."

"We are three old men an' can't see very well. Won't ye let us stay over night with ye?"

"Yes—I guess so. I haven't very good accommodations for ye."

"Oh, we can put up with anything, can't we, Jeremiah?"

"So we kin, Zedekiah."

"What d'ye say, Obediah?"

Obediah was the smallest of the trio, and hitherto had not spoken. He answered in a wheezy, cracked voice that he could sleep on a board if it was necessary.

"Oh, I've got room fur ye all," answered Mr. Hayes. "Get down."

The three old men alighted somewhat stiffly.

"Thar, I'll declar ef I ain't a'most played out!" said Jeremiah.

"I'll send some boys to put up your horses," said Farmer Hayes.

"Ef ye'd just as leave, we'll take care of our hosses. Just show us the barn."

Mr. Hayes went with them, and was very much struck with the fact that their horses were excellent animals.

The three old men used great care in feeding and rubbing them down and currying them.

"They seem like regular cranks about their horses," said Mr. Hayes.

Then he went to the house to see what arrangements could be made for his three unexpected guests.

When he had gone the last of the old men, who had been called Obediah, plucked the largest man, who had gone by the name of Jeremiah, aside and said:

"Jesse, let us understand things right now."

"Well, what is it, Bob?"

"Not a hair of these good people shall be hurt."

"Why?"

"They are my friends."

"All right, Bob. We will stop over until morning and go. Unless the old man gives us some great provocation to put a bullet through him, he will get along all right."

With this gratifying assurance, Bob Ford, with Frank and Jesse James, all disguised as old men, went into the house.

Bob Ford saw Mollie, but in that odd disguise she knew him not.

After supper was over Mollie was again hanging on the gate. He stole from the house and went to her side.

"Mollie!" he whispered.

"What?" she cried.

The voice was familiar, but when she looked

around she saw only one of the old men at her side.

"Whist, Mollie."

The old man looked up and down the road, then turned a quick glance toward the house.

Having assured himself that no one was in sight, he removed his wig and false beard.

"Bob—"

"Whist, Mollie."

"What does this mean?"

The poor girl was trembling with dread and astonishment.

"Whist, Mollie, I must talk with you; I must explain everything."

"What do you mean?" was all she could gasp.

"Don't pretend to recognize me, Mollie, or you will ruin everything. Meet me around at the rear of the barn, where we can't be seen."

"When?"

"In ten minutes."

Then Bob disappeared.

Mollie had heard so much of late about the terrible banditti and the Ford Boys that she was almost afraid to be in the presence of one of them.

She trembled.

She dared not go in the house lest her dread apprehension might excite the attention of her parents.

She wandered about the yard for some time and then made her way to the place of rendezvous selected by Bob Ford.

He was there.

"Bob, what does this mean, and why are you here?"

"Hush, Mollie, not so loud."

"Won't you explain?"

"Yes," he answered in a whisper and then he went close to her and in an undertone said;

"Mollie, I wanted to see you for one thing, but I would not have come in this way if I could have helped it."

"Why, Bob—what does it all mean? I hear so many awful stories of you, and—"

"Do you believe them, Mollie?"

"I don't know. Papa says I must."

"I have been bad, Mollie, but not so bad—no, not nearly so bad as I am represented."

"I hope not."

"Believe me, Mollie."

"I do, but who are those men with you?"

"I tremble to tell you."

"Who are they?"

"Will you not give us away?"

"I promise."

"Frank and Jesse James."

"I feared so. Why did you stop here? Surely you don't mean to rob us?"

"No, no, Mollie, nothing is further from my intentions than to harm you."

"Why did they come?"

"We must find some place of rest and I wanted to see you."

Mollie was weeping.

"Why do you cry, Mollie?"

"I am so afraid that something awful will happen to poor papa."

"Why should something awful happen to him?"

"These terrible men. Oh, if they harm him I would die."

"They will not. I have their promise."

"Their promise, Bob. What is the promise of an outlaw—a robber, a bandit?"

Bob Ford winced under this severe thrust. It seemed to be aimed directly at himself, and after a few moments he said:

"Mollie, you may not believe it, but I will assure you that no harm shall come to your father if I can help it."

She sobbed in silence.

"Do you believe me, Mollie?"

"Yes."

"I swear that what I say is true."

Then she became silent.

"Mollie, I will assume my disguise again and go to your house. You can follow soon and you can depend on me forever as a friend to yourself and family."

Notwithstanding all Bob's assurance, Mollie felt some remorse of conscience. If she had told her father who he was, she felt that she would have been doing her duty.

Now, whatever might happen she would in a certain sense be responsible for, and the poor girl was quite overwhelmed with remorse.

Bob went to the house.

He reached the front porch when he heard loud voices within.

Jesse James as Jeremiah was saying:

"They are not as black as painted, old man."

"They ain't."

"No."

"Why, they're thieves, liars, murderers, cowards. Kin anybody be worse?"

"They are not all that. They are not cowards."

"Yes, they air. I tell ye Jesse James is a coward, and he don't dare show his face about here."

"Yes, he does."

"He don't."

"What would you do if he did?"

Bob was now alarmed.

"Confound it, what brought up that unfortunate subject?" he asked himself. "Oh, if I only dared warn the old man!"

"What would I do if Jesse James was to show his face here?" cried the old man. "Why, I'd haul him to jail."

"Would ye?"

"Yes."

"Right sure ye would?"

"I know it."

Jesse James was trembling with ill-concealed rage and hate.

The old man had been a gallant Union soldier during the war, a crime which Jesse James never forgave; and then his bold defiance of the bandit now was too much for him.

"Do you want to see Jesse James, sir—do you want to?" he hissed.

"Yes."

"Well, here he is."

Jesse jerked from his face his whiskers and wig.

The old man started back in amazement, but the daring old soldier was only overcome with astonishment and held speechless for a moment.

Recovering himself the next instant he hissed: "And you are my prisoner."

Then he crouched like a tiger about to spring. "Stop right there!" cried Jesse James.

"Make a move in any direction and you are a dead man."

CHAPTER XVI.

MOLLIE'S FATE.

"THIEF, robber, murderer," roared Hayes, trembling with ill-suppressed passion.

"Hold, no more abuse," cried Jesse.

"I will not be defied by outlaws in my own house," cried Mr. Hayes, seizing a chair and raising it to strike Jesse down.

"Crack!" went the bandit's pistol.

The bullet struck one of the hard oak posts of the chair, and glanced off from it, doing the old man no harm.

But at this moment Frank seized him from behind.

The report of the pistol caused a general hubbub. Women ran screaming in the room, and half a dozen outlaws who had been within hearing of the shot now came running to the house.

They broke in at doors and windows, and old man Hayes was quickly made a prisoner.

"Don't kill my father, please don't kill him!" shrieked Mollie Hayes, rushing into the room.

"Away, girl."

"Hold, Jesse, don't harm her."

"Silence, Bob Ford."

"Your promise."

"Silence."

"I will not silence. Remember your promise, Jesse James, that you would not harm these good people."

"I will have no more from you, dog."

Bob Ford's hand went to his pistol.

Some one struck his arm, and next moment he was seized and held hand and foot.

"Don't speak again or I will kill you."

Dick Little led Bob into another room where Charley Ford joined him.

"Bob, this won't do!" said Dick Little.

"Dick, will he hurt him?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Hayes."

"He will hang him."

"Then, Dick, I will—"

"Hush, Bob, don't speak now," interrupted Charley Ford.

"Charley, go and intercede for Mr. Hayes."

"It will be no use," said Dick Little.

"Why?"

"Jesse James is inexorable. He has determined to hang him, and hang him he will."

"Oh, Dick—can't we save him?"

"No."

"It's an outrage, Charley, that we should bring destruction on our best friends," cried Bob, who was frothing at the mouth like a mad man.

"Bob."

"What, Dick?"

"Promise me one thing."

"What do you wish me to promise, Dick?"

"That whatever happens you will keep silent."

"Oh, must I?"

"Yes."

"And see my friends outraged."

"Yes."

"I can't."

"You must."

"It is more than human nature can endure," cried Bob.

"Yet you must endure it. What folly for you to do otherwise. You would simply be shot dead and do your friends no good. In fact, Bob, if you rouse Jesse thoroughly, you may excite him to wholesale slaughter of women and children."

"Heavens!" gasped Bob. "I wish that Timberlake would come now and take us all in."

"Why?"

"Captivity, death—anything is preferable to betrayal of friends."

"Oh, don't take it so hard. It may not be so hard as you think."

"Won't he hang him?"

"He may not."

"Go and see, Dick."

"Will you promise to remain here and say nothing?"

"I will."

"Nor leave the room until I come?"

"I promise."

"Charley, will you stay with your brother?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will go."

Dick Little left the apartment. He found Jesse consulting with Wood Hite and Jim Cummins.

Old man Hayes sat a short distance away tied in a chair with his wife and children about him.

"What are you going to do, Jess—hang him?" asked Dick.

Jesse answered:

"No; I'll take him out, give him a good cow-hiding, and let him go."

Then Jesse went to the prisoner.

"Come on," he said.

The prisoner did not move.

"Come on—come on, I say," and he jerked him to his feet.

"Yes. What do you intend doing with me?"

The wife and children began at once to implore mercy for him.

"Get out, or we'll hang him," roared Jesse, dragging the old man from the house.

"Come on, boys, here this tree will do. You old rascal, I will teach you how to wag your tongue. I will show you what it is to arrest the James Boys."

He dragged him to the tree and tied him.

"Spare him, spare him!" implored Mrs. Hayes and Mollie.

"Drag these women away!"

The women were pulled away from Mr. Hayes.

"Strip off his shirt!" cried Jesse, seizing his riding whip.

"Don't, don't, please don't harrow him. He has heart disease and this will kill him."

But Jesse James, who was intent only on having revenge, paid no heed to them.

"Spare him, spare him!"

"Hold the women away!" cried Jesse.

He raised the whip and struck the bare back a blow.

The prisoner started, gave a gasp, struggled a moment, and became still.

Jesse had struck three or four blows before he realized the awful consequences.

Mr. Hayes was dead!

He was afflicted with heart trouble, and the excitement had proved too much for him. He had died at the first blow.

Jesse James was appalled at the result.

Turning to two of his companions, he said in a whisper:

"Cut him down and take him in the house."

Mr. Hayes was taken in the house and laid upon the bed.

It was some minutes before his family realized the sad fate of the head of the family. Mrs. Hayes went into hysterics, and Mollie was almost insane with grief.

Jesse James, who was horror struck at the turn of events, ordered the band to mount.

"Bob—Bob, we are going," said Charley Ford to his brother, who sat like one stupefied.

Bob rose.

"Where is Mollie?"

"Come on."

"I must see her."

"No, Bob, it would be better if you did not."

"I must see Mollie, and will see her."

The signal again sounded on the air, and Charley, who had grown accustomed to obeying

the orders of the bandit chieftain, hurried out to mount.

"Bob," he called at the door.

"Well?"

"Will you follow?"

"Yes."

Bob Ford tore off the disguise and hurled it from the window.

He went in search of Mollie Hayes, and found her at the bedside of her dead father.

"Mollie!" he whispered.

She turned her pale face toward him.

"I want to speak with you."

"Not here."

"No—come with me into the yard."

She followed him. There Bob Ford turned and said:

"Mollie—believe me. I didn't have any hand in this awful work."

She was silent.

"I tried to prevent it."

Still she was silent.

"Mollie, don't you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Mollie, listen. I will avenge him."

She turned her marble face toward him, and gave Bob a look which he will remember to his dying day.

"Can it do any good?" she asked. "Can it bring the dead to life?"

"No, but his blood shall not go unavenged."

"I am the guilty one."

"You guilty, Mollie?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, I!"

There was a sadness in her voice, and an awful solemnity in her manner, which thrilled Bob.

"Mollie, don't talk so strangely."

"Does it seem strange that a girl who has assisted to murder her father should admit it?"

"But you did not."

"I did."

"You are innocent."

"I am guilty."

"How can you say that?"

Bob Ford began to fear that Mollie Hayes, his little school-girl sweetheart, was mad.

"I am not mad—I am not mad!" she cried.

"It was I who knew that outlaws were in the neighborhood. I knew you was a member of the James Boys band, and yet I kept the secret from my father. I told him nothing, when I should have told him all. The result is that I am his murderer."

"Oh, Mollie, do not blame yourself in that way."

"I do."

"Don't."

"I must blame myself. I should have denounced you at first. Then I would have saved my father's life. But I shielded a serpent and it has stung me. My father is dead, and—I—"

She turned about and entered the house, without finishing the sentence.

For a few moments Bob Ford stood in the yard, his head bowed until his chin rested on chest.

He was the picture of remorse and despair.

The whinnying of his horse aroused him, and he turned and went to the horse and mounted.

"What am I to do now?" he thought.

He was was careless. He was reckless. He had lost his cunning and the enjoyment of a dash down the road.

The officers would have had an easy capture had they come on Bob for the next three days. He was undisguised and unconcerned.

On the third day he boldly entered a village, and went to the hotel.

No one knew him. Fortune seems to favor people at certain times and Bob was certainly favored now. He had finished his dinner and picked up a newspaper when a paragraph caught his eye.

The headlines in black letters said:

"MURDER AND SUICIDE."

Then followed a long account of the atrocious murder of Mr. Hayes by the James Boys, and the paper stated that the daughter, Mollie Hayes, was so overcome and shocked by the death of her father that she had committed suicide by leaping into the horse pond.

CHAPTER XVII.

BOB'S OATH.

Bob Ford quietly read the account through, then he took out his knife and cut it from the paper.

Having made the clipping, he folded and put it on the inside of his left coat pocket, just over his heart.

His face was very calm. One, to see him, would not dream that he was undergoing any mental struggle.

One would not dream that the fires of revenge were burning like some volcanic eruption within his breast.

He rose from the table and went to the office. Here a man with gray hair and beard approached Bob and touched his arm.

"I want to speak with you," he whispered.

"With me?"

"Yes."

"You must be mistaken."

"No, I am not."

"Come to my room."

"Have you a room here?"

"Yes."

"Lead the way."

They ascended a narrow, cramped stairway and came to a narrow, dark corridor.

At the farther end was Bob's room.

Entering, he turned to his visitor, and laying his hand on the butt of his pistol, which was beneath his coat, he said:

"Now, sir, what is it?"

"Bob Ford—"

"Ha, you know me."

"Yes."

Before another word could be uttered Bob had drawn his revolver and cocked it.

"Hold, Bob Ford!"

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

Bob's hand fell to his side, for he recognized the voice.

"Put up your pistol, Bob," said Charley, removing his disguise.

"Charley Ford."

"Yes, your brother."

"I came near shooting you, Charley."

"Bob, you are very foolish."

"Why do you say that?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know."

"You are not disguised even."

"No."

"Do you want to be taken?"

After a short time spent in reflection, Bob answered:

"No."

"Of course not."

"Charley!"

He spoke slowly and solemnly, yet there was a deep and awful meaning in his words.

"What would you say, Bob?"

"I want to live awhile."

"Of course."

"I am going to live for revenge."

"What do you mean?"

For answer Bob put his hand in the inside pocket of his coat, and pulled out the newspaper clipping which he had cut from the paper.

This he held up to his brother and said:

"Read it."

Charley did so.

He read in silence, and Bob sat watching him.

When he had finished it he asked:

"What do you think of it?"

Charley carefully folded the clipping and returning it to his brother with a sad shake of the head answered:

"It is a terrible affair."

"Yes."

"It is a sad ending of a most unfortunate occurrence."

"Charley!"

"Well, Bob?"

"Doesn't your conscience smite you just a little bit?"

"Yes."

"We are guilty, Charley."

"Yes."

"Oh, I feel at times as if I would go mad!"

"Why, Bob, you could not prevent Jesse. You did all you could."

"We should never have taken him there."

"Yes, we made a mistake in that."

"So we did, and a serious one."

Then Bob was silent for a moment.

He rose and began to pace the floor.

"We can't help it, Bob; it is done, and can't be helped now."

"Yes, it can."

"How? Both are dead."

"Dead! Yes, both dead, Charley, and once they were our best friends. Don't you remember, brother, when we were school boys going to the old Dover school house, how we used to pass the house of Mr. Hayes every day?"

"Quite well."

"Don't you remember that he always greeted us with smiles and kind words?"

"He did."

"Did he not always say:

"Boys, there are big red apples in my orchard, or there are nuts in the pasture, or strawberries in the meadows. Help yourselves?"

"He did, Bob."

"And we were always welcome at his house."

"We were."

"And never was mother more kind to us than Mrs. Hayes."

"You are correct, Bob. I shall never forget how when I was ill she came and watched over me and bathed my fevered brow with cold water and nursed me back to health."

"We remember all this now, Charley—and yet how have we repaid all their gratitude—how have we in return treated them?"

"Bob, we have done them no harm."

"We have!"

"How?"

"Who first took the James Boys there?"

"We did, but—"

"We took them there and were responsible for their acts."

"We were not. Didn't we try to prevent it?"

"Yes."

"Then let it rest. We have done all we could, and we can do no more now."

"We can."

"What?"

"Avenge them."

"Avenge them," cried Charley.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, Charley, I am going to register a vow to Heaven."

"To do what, Bob?"

"To kill Jesse James."

"Hush—hush, you don't know what you are talking about."

"Oh, I do."

"You don't realize what a terrible being Jesse James is."

"I do," Bob answered. "I know all about him. Bob, knowing him as I do, I know that by day and by night, by week and by month, by year and by decade, I will with unrelenting vengeance pursue Jesse James. I will hang like a cunning fox on his track. I will be a sleuth bound to follow him. I will be a fawning sycophant at his feet. I will be his best friend. I will win his confidence. I will deceive him, and when I have him completely won over to me I will shoot and kill him as I would a dog."

"Bob," gasped Charley. Charley was unable to finish his sentence for a few moments, for the catch his brother had just registered had quite taken his breath away.

At last he recovered sufficient to again gasp:

"Brother, you have just registered a terrible vow."

"I will keep it."

"Dare you—"

"Yes, Charley, will you go in with me?"

"Yes."

"Then we will sell him."

"How?"

"Governor Crittenden has offered five thousand dollars for Jesse James, dead or alive."

"Yes."

"Let us earn the five thousand dollars."

"Well, we will."

But a moment later Charley thought he saw an obstacle in the way and said:

"How can we?"

"Easily."

"The governor will have us arrested for highway robbery."

"No, he won't."

"Why not?"

"We must arrange all that before."

"How?"

"See him."

"See him? Bob, are you crazy?"

"No."

"How can we see him?"

"Go to Jefferson City."

"And be arrested and thrown in prison?"

"No, we will not."

"It's dangerous."

"So is our life. But, Charley, I am going to get out of this. He who enticed us into a career of crime shall find that he has enticed his own death. I could have forgiven Jesse James for the crime he has done us, but for the wrongs to the Hayes family there is no forgiveness in this world or the next."

"Bob, in order to accomplish all this, you will have to be shrewd and cunning."

"I know it."

"You must not let him suspect—"

"No—no. I will be cunning, more cunning than the fox."

"But here you are without disguise on."

"I have no disguise."

"Here is one."

He took from a capacious inside pocket of his coat a bundle which proved to be a wig and short gray beard.

"Put these on."

At this moment loud voices were heard down below.

"What is that?"

"I don't know."

"There are angry men talking."

"Seems as if they would fight."

"Go down, Charley, and see what the matter is. I will disguise myself and follow."

Charley hastened down the stairway, and Bob hurriedly disguising himself followed.

He had reached the top of the landing when he heard his brother in a disguised voice, say:

"He is not up there. I assure ye he's not there."

"Who is?"

"An old fellow."

"Well, I'll see."

The door opened and a constable came up the stairway.

He gazed at Bob who was now disguised very completely as an old man, and asked:

"Say, mister, did ye see a young feller?"

"Yes."

"A short time ago."

"Yes."

"With gray suit on?"

"Yes."

"And straw hat."

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"Dun know," Bob answered. "Left up-stairs while ago in sort of a rush like, as if he war in a hurry."

"Do you know who that fellow was?" asked the constable.

"How should I?"

"It was Bob Ford, one o' the notorious James Boys gang."

"Lor, ye don't mean it, do ye?"

"Yes, I do. We tracked him to this place."

"Then lemme git away," said Bob, running hurriedly down the stairs.

There he seized Charley's arm, and in a tone that was tremulous, cried:

"Come on; let's git out o' here right away, for they do say the Ford Boys are here."

And Charley and Bob mounted their horses and galloped away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JESSE AND FRANK.

One bleak damp morning two men entered the little town of Kearney on horseback.

They both wore the slouch hats of Westerners and had all the air and manner of cowboys or rather drovers, for each carried the heavy drover's whip instead of the cowboy's quirt.

"Howdy!" said the largest, whose beard was flecked with gray.

He addressed the proprietor of the country store, who was standing on the porch of his building.

"How are you, sir?"

"Know any one wot's got any cattle ter sell?"

"No."

"Wot's ther noos?" asked the drover, throwing his right leg over the horn of his saddle.

"None."

"Ain't heerd no noos erbout the James Boys?"

"Yes."

"Wot is it?"

"They're still at large, makin' everybody look sharp. Bankers and railroads tremble."

"Yer don't reckon they'll hurt we'uns, d'yer?"

"No—why should they?"

"Cos, yer see, we're buyin' cattle. We're from Arkinsaw, we be, an' we've brought a heap o' money with us up Inter Missouri ter buy cattle."

"So you are afraid of the James Boys?"

"Yes, we be."

"Well, if they knew ye had so much money erbout yer they might relieve ye of it," said the merchant. "So ye'd better not tell 'em."

"I won't. Oh, I ain't agoin' ter tell anybody. But d'ye reckon they're erbout hyar now?"

"Don't think so."

"Why?"

"Timberlake was here yesterday, an' if the James Boys had been in the neighborhood he'd a got them sure."

"And didn't Timberlake get 'em?"

"No."

"I wonder why?"

"Because they were not here."

"And whar's Timberlake?"

"Gone back."

"Back where?"

"To Kansas City."

The merchant growing weary of answering the questions of the stranger, turned about and entered his store.

The horsemen, who were mounted on excellent steeds, turned their horses slowly about and rode away.

As soon as they were beyond sight and hearing of the village, the horseman who had kept silent, turned to the man who had done the speaking and said:

"Jess, you are a good one."

With a quiet laugh Jesse James, for it was he, answered:

"I flatter myself that I know how to manage them."

"Do you believe he told us the truth?"

"About Timberlake?"

"Why not?"

"Well he might have suspected us, you know."

"Suspected us nothing. Why should he suspect us?"

"Ah, sometimes these country merchants have very sharp perceptions."

"Yes, but he did not suspect I don't believe."

"But, Jesse?"

"Well, Frank?"

"It will be well for us to keep a sharp lookout."

"Yes."

"Always do that."

"I do."

"You are getting a little careless of late, Jess, and some of these days—"

"I am very careful, Frank."

"You are not."

"In what am I reckless?"

"You trust people too far."

"Whom do I trust?"

"Bob."

"Bob Ford?"

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha! Why, Bob Ford is my best friend."

"I don't know, Jesse."

"What cause have you to doubt him?"

"That Hayes matter last summer."

"Ha, ha, ha! Bob has forgotten that."

"Now, Jesse, I doubt if he has."

"Why do you?"

"The look of a demon which came on his face when he knew the old man was dead I will never forget. Then it was a week after the girl had committed suicide before he joined us."

"Perhaps there was good cause for his not joining us."

"Perhaps, for we were hunted like wolves for that. I tell you, Jesse, it was a bad thing for us."

"What?"

"The Hayes matter."

"I had no intention to kill the old fellow."

"Of course not."

"All I intended doing was to give him a gentle drubbing and put a stop to his clatter."

"Better to have let him clatter."

"I suppose so."

"Where are we going?"

"To mother's house."

It was a disagreeable day in autumn and the James Boys drew their cloaks about them, and galloped on through a drizzling rain, which towards evening changed to a fine snow.

They reached the residence of Dr. Samuels about dusk and after carefully reconnoitering went in the house.

Mrs. Samuels who was their mother rose at their entrance but did not recognize them, for both were in disguise.

"Mother, don't you know us?" Jesse asked.

"Jess, Jess, my boy!"

"And is this Frank?"

"It is."

"Oh, boys, I am so glad to see you."

"Mother, has Timberlake been seen about here?" Jesse asked.

"No."

"He was in town."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"He didn't come here."

"Then he will."

"Oh, no—may be he has gone back to Kansas City."

"Not much, mother. We know Timberlake too well."

"We will have a visit from him to-night," remarked Frank James, coolly, as he sat before the great blazing fire of hickory logs.

"Can't you boys stay for some supper?" asked the mother.

"I guess so, can't we, Frank?"

"We'll do it at our risk."

"Oh, we do everything at a risk," Jesse James answered. "A man takes a big risk in living in these days."

"Yes, in our profession."

"A bigger risk I'll warrant than any life insurance company would care to take."

"Think of it—an underwriter issuing a policy on the life of one of the James Boys. Ha, ha, ha."

"Well, boys, you must have something to eat and your horses fed. Have ye Siroc and Jim Malone yet?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. I always feel that you are surer when you ride Siroc and Jim Malone."

"And we are safer, mother, for there are not better horses on earth!" cried Frank James.

"Better horses," answered Jesse. "Not as good."

The lady went to the rear door of the house and called to her son:

"Johnny—Johnny, come here."

In a moment a lad of fourteen or fifteen years of age appeared.

"What is it, mother?"

"Here are Frank and Jesse."

"Oh, yes, glad to see 'em."

Johnny Samuels then shook the hands of each one of the half brothers, and the mother said:

"John, can't ye go and put up Siroc and Jim Malone?"

"You bet," cried Johnny. "Oh, they are horses; the best in the world," cried Johnny, bounding away toward the door.

"Johnny!" called Jesse.

"Well, Jess?"

"Rub them down well."

"I will."

"And keep a sharp lookout down the road."

"You bet."

"If you see any one coming this way hurry back and inform us, Johnny."

"I'll do it."

"Now go."

"All right."

"And rub 'em down good, Johnny."

"I will."

"Don't give them too much water."

"No."

"Hurry."

"I'm gone."

He closed the door with a bang and was gone. Mrs. Samuels soon had a smoking supper.

It was now quite dark.

The wind howled a mournful requiem about the house, and sighed a mournful dirge among the locust trees.

The boys sat down to supper, and the warm, cozy house contrasted so favorably with the disagreeably cold road, that it would require no little self denial for one to leave it.

"Well, boys, what is to be your next raid?" asked Dr. Samuels.

"Don't know," Jesse answered.

"And wouldn't tell if you did."

"No."

"I guess it's the best policy."

"If you have no secrets you can be forced to tell no secrets."

"That is true."

"And we have thought this about ourselves. Even if we form a plan, we never tell it to any one until the moment comes for work."

They had just finished their suppers and pushed away their plates when Johnny burst in at the door.

"They're coming!" cried the boy.

"Who?"

"Don't know."

"Where?"

"Down the lane."

"How many?"

"Six or seven."

"Jess, it's detectives," cried Frank, who at once began an examination of his revolvers.

"Ten to one it's Timberlake."

"Yes."

Then the James Boys sprang to a window.

"Turn down the lamp, mother," cried Jesse James. "Johnny go and bring the horses."

"Where do ye want 'em, Jess?"

"Right there at the rear door."

Johnny disappeared, and Jesse and Frank both stood gazing down the lane.

The faint outline of horsemen could just be seen.

They were coming slowly up the lane and evidently exercising caution.

"Can you see them, Jesse?" asked Dr. Samuels.

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"Timberlake."

"The sheriff?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I can make out six or eight."

"He is after us, that's quite certain," said Frank.

Then the north or rear door was opened, and Johnny, poking his head inside, said:

"All ready?"

"Frank, are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Let's go. Good-bye, all. Take care of yourselves," said Jesse, almost gaily.

He ran from the house, leaped into the saddle, followed by Frank James.

There came from the road below the clatter of hoofs and cries of:

"Halt, halt!"

"There they go."

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

The James Boys gave a yell of defiance, leaped a fence and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIX.

DICK LITTLE AND WOOD HITE.

THE James Boys had selected old man Hite's house as the place for their rendezvous for the winter.

The old man Hite was the father of Wood Hite, one of the banditti.

And then old Hite had been a member of Quantrell's, Anderson's and Shelby's guerrillas during the war, and had always been a warm friend of the James Boys.

Old Hite's young wife, for he had married a second wife, was a great favorite among the banditti, and especially with Jesse James.

Jesse and Frank spent a part of the time with their families sometimes in Kansas City and sometimes in St. Joseph, Mo.

Hite's house was a large double log house, weatherboarded without, and ceiled with walnut boards within.

It had been built many years before the war, and was situated in a dense wood in Clay county, considerably removed from any main road or thoroughfare, and was beyond doubt the most desirable place for a rendezvous in all Missouri.

Here came Bob and Charlie Ford with Jesse James and Frank.

"You will like it here," said Jesse to Bob.

"Are you going to stay, Jesse?"

"No, not all winter."

"I would rather you would!"

"Why?"

"I always feel safer when you are about than when you are not."

"Do you?"

"I do."

"Well, you will have all the band here."

"Wood Hite and Dick Little seem to have no love for each other," said Bob to change the subject.

"Don't they?"

"No."

"I believe you. And I hope that Dick will kill Wood Hite before Spring," said Jesse James his eyes flashing with fire.

"Why?"

"I hate him."

"Wood Hite?"

"Yes."

Then Bob thought that if there was so much bitter feeling in the band, might he not be able to use it to further his own plans?

Weeks went by.

Jesse and Frank were only a part of the time present.

Wood Hite and his father frequently talked of Jesse James, and Wood one day said:

"He despises me."

"And I despise him, Wood. If you kill him you can be chief in his place."

"Yes."

"Do it."

"I believe I will."

One dark night Frank and Jesse James came to the Hite Castle, as the house was called.

The snow was falling rapidly, and all the banditti was gathered in the great dining-room.

Mrs. Hite and the one servant had prepared supper and the table had been cleared away.

Jesse took Bob Ford to a separate apartment and asked:

"Do Wood Hite and Dick Little get along smoothly now?"

"No."

"They don't?"

"They quarrel."

"Do they?"

"Yes, and will fight some day."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes—I tell you, Jesse James, there is a smoldering volcano there which will burst forth some day with a terrific explosion."

"Do you know, Bob, that I am your best friend?"

Bob had all he could do to conceal his hatred of the man he had sworn to kill. But he assumed a smile and said:

"I believe you, Jesse."

"I am, and Bob, I trust you farther than any other member of the band."

"I am glad you do."

"Now, Bob, I am going to confide a secret to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I hate Wood Hite. Three years ago we quarreled while we were in Wisconsin. He has always defied my authority; I want to kill him."

"And you will, Jesse."

"Do you think it?"

"I do. You do whatever you want to do."

"Well, Bob, you are correct there."

"Now, Jesse, tell me, didn't you come here for that purpose?"

"Yes."

"I knew it."

"Are you a mind reader?"

"No, but I am a motive reader."

"Bob, you are the shrewdest man in my band and I've a mind to make you my lieutenant."

"Have you?"

"Yes—would you like it?"

"Yes."

"I will in time. Now to business. If Dick Little and Wood Hite resume their quarrel to-night let it go on."

"I will."

"If they draw pistols get out of the way—I shall settle Wood Hite, but I would rather have the band think it was Dick Little."

"Of course."

"And as to Dick, I haven't much against him, though in reality I don't care much about him."

"Nor I. Does Frank and Jim Cummins understand this?"

"No."

"Why don't you explain to them?"

"I don't want my motives known to too many, Bob."

The reader will understand how Bob Ford must have worked on the bandit king of America in order to get so completely in his confidence as he had done.

Jesse James was a shrewd, suspicious fellow, as history has shown. He never allowed any one to get the advantage of him, and watched the members of his own band.

By what remarkable power Bob Ford had succeeded in gaining the confidence of the man he had sworn to slay, the world will never know.

Throughout all his scheming and planning to bring about the dread result of his vengeance, and at the same time deliver himself and his brother from the law, Bob Ford never once awakened the faintest suspicion in the mind of Jesse James.

Bob and Jesse went into the dining-room where the band was seated about the table playing cards and dice.

Some were gambling and some were playing for pastime.

Dick Little and Jim Cummins were at one end of the table playing poker.

Wood Hite, who had imbibed rather more than the James Boys permitted, was becoming boisterous.

"Wood, make less noise," said Jesse.

"Less noise—whoop! I am on the war path!" yelled Wood Hite, leaping in the air.

"Come—come, Wood," said Mrs. Hite, "you must keep quiet."

"I can lick any man that says I am to keep quiet."

"Come—come, Wood, let us have no quarreling," said Frank James.

"I am not quarreling."

"What do you mean?"

"I am just in fun, Frank."

Jesse James' brow was lowered.

"Well, wait until morning, and then you will not be so extraordinarily funny," said Dick Little, who had been jostled by Wood Hite in his promenade up and down the dining-room.

"Who spoke?"

"I did."

"Dick Little?"

"Yes."

"Don't ye insult me."

"It's coming now," Jesse James whispered to Bob Ford.

"I am certain it is."

"Perhaps you had better get out of the way." Bob started toward the door as Dick Little cried:

"Wood Hite, sit down!" cried Dick Little in a rage.

"I won't."

"If you can't behave yourself go out of the house until you sober off."

"I'll shut you up in a minute."

"You won't."

"I will."

"Sit down."

"Shut up."

"Wood Hite, you have insulted me as long as I will endure it."

"Then it's a fight."

"Yes."

"Hold, hold, put those pistols up!" cried Jim Cummins.

"No, he's got to die!" roared Wood Hite.

"Clear the room!" shouted Dick Little.

Dick had seen Wood Hite draw his pistol and had drawn his own revolver.

Crack!

Wood got in the first shot.

Dick Little uttered a groan and staggered.

A bullet had struck his leg.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

They were now firing a fusillade at each other and Dick's hat was shot off his head.

"Out of the room."

"Clear the way everybody."

Jim Cummins darted under a table, and lay there safe from the bullets which whizzed thick as hail above them.

The fight had progressed until the room was full of smoke.

Dick Little, wounded at the very first shot from Wood Hite's pistol, staggered and leaned upon the table. His shots went wild.

Wood Hite in his blind, drunken fury, was shooting more at random than at anyone.

Jesse James crept forward, fired one shot, and Wood Hite fell dead.

That night they dug a grave and buried him in the garden, and no one but Bob Ford knew that it was Jesse's hand that slew Wood Hite.

"He has had his revenge," Bob Ford said to himself, as he watched the bandit chief whose very name had become a terror. "He has had his revenge, but the day is coming when I will have mine. Mollie Hayes you shall be avenged!"

CHAPTER XX.

OLD HITE IN A RAGE.

"What will we do with Dick Little?" Frank James asked.

"He must be sent out of the country," Jesse answered.

"He is shot."

"Bad wounded?"

"Yes, he's got a bullet in his thigh."

Dick had been carried into an apartment in the wing of the house and laid upon a bed.

Bob ran into the apartment where the James Boys were and said:

"Jesse, we must do something for Dick at once."

"Why?"

"Old man Hite is in a rage."

"About what?"

"His son."

"Being killed?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was a fair fight."

"He says it was not. He swears that unfair means were taken of Wood Hite and that he was assassinated."

Jesse's brow grew dark, and his eye assumed the fatal glitter which always appeared on it when he was angered.

"Who does he think assassinated him?" he asked.

"Dick."

Jesse led Bob aside.

"Bob?"

"Sir."

"Does he intimate that it was any one else?"

"No."

"Not by a hint?"

"Not by a hint to me."

"Do you think he suspects anybody else?"

"No, I don't."

"Very well. Let that go then."

"What will you do about Dick?"

"Get him out of the way."

"Where will we take him?"

"To Kentucky."

"Will I go?"

"Yes. I want you and Frank to go with him."

"And you?"

After a moment's reflection Jesse James said:

"Well, I will go too."

At this moment loud yells and exclamations of anger could be heard in the front apartment. The voice betokened both anger and grief, perhaps the most dangerous elements that can combine in one's feelings.

"Who is it, Bob?"

"Hite."

"He is enraged."

"Let me go—let me at him—I will avenge my child."

"Keep quiet, Mr. Hite," some of the band expostulatingly said to the enraged father.

"Keep quiet, keep quiet!" yelled the old man in a voice that rang throughout the building and could be heard far out over the forest. "To keep quiet when my poor boy lies out there cold and dead would be sacrilege. I will not keep quiet."

"I must go to him," said Jesse.

"Jesse, promise me you won't shed any more blood."

Jesse turned to gaze at Bob for a moment, and answered:

"No, I will shed no more blood for this night, Bob, but the old man must do Dick no harm."

"You can surely prevent him."

"Yes."

"And you will not harm him?"

"No."

Jesse hurried into the room where Jim Cummins, Frank James and another outlaw named Ed McMillan were holding Mr. Hite by main force to prevent his doing Dick Little an injury.

"Get away from me. Oh, let met at him. I want to get at him. I will kill him. Do you hear me? I will kill him," cried Mr. Hite, struggling to free himself.

"Mr. Hite, what do you mean?" Jesse James asked, on entering the apartment where the afflicted father stood.

"My boy has been killed."

"I am aware of that."

"And I am going to kill his murderer."

"Calm yourself, Mr. Hite."

"I won't."

"You must."

At this moment there came a rap at the door. The storm was howling wild without, and the house being isolated so far from any main road of travel that the sudden rap at the door was enough to arouse the curiosity, if not excite the alarm, of all within the house.

"Sh!" whispered Jesse. "Mr. Hite, we will have a visitor soon. Do you want to hang?"

"No."

"Then you must change your manner."

"The old man's cheek was damp with tears. He wiped them away, and in an undertone said:

"This is not over yet."

"No; but some one must go to the door and see who that is."

"I will go."

The manner of the old man was changed in a moment, and he went hurriedly to the door, which he swung open.

A traveler, muffled in a great coat and carrying a riding whip in his hand, stood there.

"Who are you?" demanded Old Man Hite.

"A benighted traveler, sir. I have lost my way."

"What do you want?"

"Shelter until morning for myself and beast."

He was a man past middle age, but had the general appearance of a business man.

Old Hite scrutinized him carefully for a few moments and said:

"I'll see."

Then he closed the door on the shivering stranger, leaving him to wait in the cold and driving storm while he went to consult with some one.

"Jesse, what am I to do?" he asked. "Here is a man who has lost his way and wants to stay all night with us."

"Is there but one man?"

"That's all."

"What does he look like?"

"A farmer, a drover, tradesman, or common traveler."

"Well, admit."

"To stay all night?"

"Yes—if he has money enough to warrant the boys will have it."

"Yes."

"Then we can have two graves in the garden before morning."

Then turning to the others the bandit king added:

"We must not allow the stranger to see us. So come into another apartment. Let us go into a wing of the house."

They followed him.

Jesse turned back to see that all traces of the recent combat had been eradicated from the dining-room and to enjoin on Old Man Hite the greatest caution.

"You must not by word or act intimate what has happened."

"I'll not, but as soon as he is gone I will kill Dick Little."

"You and Dick for that," Jesse answered.

"But remember that you have the safety of the entire band to look after."

"I know."

Then Jesse turned about and hurried into the apartment where his band was assembled.

"Now, lads, we've got to do some very lively planning."

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"Dick must be got away from here to-night."

"This very night?"

"This very hour. There is blood in the old man's eye and he means mischief. Unless we get Dick away the tragedy will be doubled."

"How'll we do it?"

"Bob, you must stay."

Bob looked disappointed.

"You have changed your plans."

"Yes, or rather my plans have changed themselves. I will take Charley with me to Kentucky and will leave you here with Frank, Jim and Ed. Charley!"

"Yes, sir."

"Go to the barn and harness the grays to the double seated sleigh."

"Are you going by sleigh?"

"We must. Dick is too badly wounded to go on horseback. I will take him to my mother's house, where our step-father, Dr. Samuels, will extract the ball and treat him until we are able to get him on to Kentucky."

"You are going to Kentucky?"

"Yes. Now, Charley, get the sleigh."

Jesse then gave a few instructions to Bob and Frank, mainly to the effect that they were to keep together and be cautious.

Charley soon brought the sleigh, and all were ready.

They carried Dick Little out through the window, and placing him in the sleigh, hurried away with him.

"Now, boys!" said Frank James, when all had once more returned. "I've made up my mind that we'll do up this stranger."

"Why?" asked Bob.

"He's got money."

"How'll we do it, Frank?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Knock him on the head, and put him alongside of Wood Hite."

Bob Ford shuddered.

This villain could talk of murder and robbery as though it was an ordinary matter. Without seeming to dissent he ascertained the room in which the stranger was to sleep, and determined to warn him to fly.

Under pretense of going to bed Bob slipped out of the house, climbed a walnut tree which grew up under the window of the room in which the new-comer was to sleep, and entered the room before he did.

He concealed himself in a small closet and a few moments later the stranger came to the room.

As he was about to retire, Bob stepped forth and whispered:

"Don't!"

"Where did you come from?" asked the stranger.

For answer Bob pointed to the closet, and with his fingers to his lips whispered:

"Lower! Talk lower."

"Who are you?" whispered the stranger.

"One who would save your life."

"Yes. I see I am in a den of thieves?"

"Yes."

"Murderers?"

"You are."

"Who are they?"

"Did you ever hear of the James Boys?"

"Yes."

"This is their rendezvous. They are here to-night, and a plot has been laid to kill you."

"To kill me! Why?"

"To rob you."

The new comer was no doubt a brave man, for he was not startled or alarmed by this intelligence. He coolly asked:

"What are you doing here?"

"I am one of them!"

"One of the James Boys band?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your name?"

"Is Bob Ford."

"Why do you inform me?"

"Because I am tired of this life, and want to get out of it."

"I am glad I met you, sir, for I may be of aid to you. I am Carl Greene, one of Pinkerton's detectives, sent to capture the James Boys. Will you help me do it?"

"Yes, but we can't to-night. You must go."

"I will go, but I will see you again. You can go below now, and when they come to kill me they won't find me here," said Carl Greene with a smile.

Bob went below.

At midnight Frank James and Ed went up to kill the traveler, and were amazed to find his room empty.

Old Hite rushed into Dick Little's room to assassinate him, but found him gone, and his rage knew no bounds.

CHAPTER XXI.

JESSE'S WILD RIDE.

Weeks have passed.

Jesse and Charley Ford safely conducted Dick Little to a place in Kentucky, where he could remain, it was supposed, in seclusion.

"Now Charlie, you can go back to Missouri by the rail road if you wish," said Jesse.

"How are you going?"

"On Siroc."

Jesse had brought Siroc with him.

"Won't old man Hite be furious at us, Jesse?"

"I suspect he will."

"And so do I."

"When you go back you had better not go to his house."

"I won't."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know."

"I have it, Charley, go to my house."

"At Kansas City?"

"No, I've moved to St. Joe. Have you never met my wife and children?"

"No."

"Well they know of you and Bob. Go and find Bob and when you get to my house, give her this ring and tell her that you were sent by the owner of it to remain there until he came."

"Describe her so I will know her."

"She is known in St. Joseph as Mrs. Jackson, and with her two sons lives on the hill north part of the town in a small cottage which overlooks the Missouri. There you will find them, and there you will be welcome."

Charley Ford set out that very night and went to find Bob and go to St. Joseph.

Jesse James mounted Siroc next morning, and entering the old Louisville road went for half a day in the direction of the great southern city.

Then he came to a small wayside inn where he halted and asked for his dinner and horse feed.

"Yes, sir, I'll send a boy to put up yer horse," said the country landlord.

The James Boys made it a rule from which they never varied to look after their own horses. They went always to look after them themselves.

Jesse therefore said he would go to see about his horse.

"Oh, the boy can do it."

"I'll go."

"Not necessary."

"Yes, it is."

"Why?"

"I always feed my own horse."

"Do ye?"

"Yes."

"Wall, I reckon ye'll hev ter go."

"Yes, I will see that he has just the right kind of food and the right quantity also."

Jesse James went with a negro boy who led Siroc to the barn.

"Golly, boss, yez got er mighty fine boss."

"Yes."

"Bet he kin run."

"He can."

"Ride him fur!"

"Not very."

"Wall, boss, dar war some fellers here lookin' fur de James Boys, an' dey said dat Jesse James rid a big black boss, sumfin like dis'n iz."

"Did they?"

Jesse James was now all interest and attention.

"Yes, dey did."

"When were they here?"

"Yisterday."

"Yisterday?"

"Dey war."

"How many?"

"Nine."

"Who were they?"

"Dar war one detective feller erlong wid 'em, wot I think wur name Carl Greene."

"Carl Greene!" gasped Jesse.

The situation was alarming. He removed the saddle, curried Siroc, cooled his back, and replaced the saddle once more.

"There is no knowing how soon I may have to mount and ride for life," he thought.

Then he went to the house and said:

"How soon can I have dinner?"

"In a few minutes, sir."

"All right—hurry up!"

"I'll have it ready in short order. Come in the bar-room and smoke a cigar."

"I prefer to smoke on the porch."

"On the porch?"

"Yes."

"Why, it's winter now."

"I enjoy the winter."

"I'd think ye'd not care for the cold blast that sweeps down the hills."

"I enjoy it."

"Where did ye come from—Greenland?"

Laughing, Jesse answered:

"No, I'm from Dakota."

"Oh, yes."

"I've been rocked on cyclones and fed on blizzards. My toys of childhood were mountains of snow and glaciers of ice. The cold north wind is my mother that sung me to sleep."

Jesse could not repress a smile at the look of astonishment on the face of the landlord.

"Wall, mister, yer what I'd call a gee-rancher."

Though gee-rancher was a new word in the vocabulary of Jesse James, he didn't exactly know what a gee-rancher was, but he did not care for a definition, and contented himself with saying:

"Hurry up with my dinner."

"Yes."

Dinner was at last announced and he was told to come in.

"Guess ye can stand the heat o' a room long ernuff ter eat yer dinner, can't yer?"

"I'll try."

"I'll bring in a cake o' ice ter rest yer feet on ef yewant it."

Jesse was about to make some reply to this sally of wit when the clatter of horses' hoofs arrested his attention.

He paused in the hallway to see a long-haired middle aged man draw rein in front of the house and ask:

"Can I get dinner?"

"Yes."

"Horse fed?"

"Yes."

"I get down."

He dismounted.

"Take my horse to the barn."

The negro boy who came out hurried away with the horse.

It was but a few moments until the stranger entered.

"Where are yer goin'?" asked the landlord.

"To Louisville."

"Guess yer got company."

"Where?" asked the stranger.

"Thar."

The landlord pointed at Jesse.

The new-comer gave the bandit king a steady gaze.

Jesse returned it.

"I have seen him afore," Jesse thought.

"Now, where have I seen him?"

And the stranger thought.

"That fellow is disguised, but I have certainly seen him."

"Ain't ye goin' ter Louisville?" asked the landlord of Jesse.

"No."

"What? I thort ye said ye war?"

"No."

"Let's eat."

All sat down.

The stranger eyed Jesse, and Jesse eyed the stranger.

"I say, sir, do you know me?" asked the stranger of Jesse.

"No."

"What do you keep your eyes on me for?"

"I've seen you."

"Yes, and Jesse James you are my prisoner."

"Carl Greene!"

"Surrender."

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

Two pistol shots rang out in quick succession. But as both fired both fell under the table and missed.

Bang went window glass, sash and all.

By a dextrous backward summersault Jesse James hurled himself through the window, alighting on the ground outside the house, his face toward the barn.

Away he ran.

"Bang!"

"Whiz!"

The bullet tipped the broad rim of his hat, and next moment Jesse was on Siroc.

"Clear the way!" he shouted, dashing out into the road.

Carl Greene, for the pursuer was the famous detective, blew a shrill blast on a silver whistle.

Next moment a dozen men came out of the snow freighted woods and spurred their horses after Jesse James.

Then began a wild, desperate ride with Jesse James in the lead.

"Come on, come on!" he shouted, rising high in his stirrups and waving his hat in the air. "I will lead you a merry, merry chase."

It was a mad, wild flight.

Down a dark rocky glen sped Siroc, chased by half a dozen of the best blue blooded horses of Kentucky. Kentucky thoroughbreds have long held their reign as the swiftest horses in the world.

There can be found the thoroughbreds, the pure Arabian stock and finest animals in the world.

But none could outstrip Siroc.

In speed and endurance he never found his equal in all his life, and on this occasion he soon distanced every competitor.

"They will have to give it up!" laughed Jesse James.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" he roared aloud. "Did you fools expect to overhaul Siroc?"

Night came on and the pursuers were lost sight of.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DUEL.

ANOTHER week has rolled by.

It is a lonely day in January. There are some delightful days in January down in Kentucky.

The sun shines as brightly as in May and the birds sing in the trees, and one-half expects to see the flower bloom and grass grow.

Hornellsville, Kentucky, was a quiet—we might almost say a dull, sleepy, little town.

Sometimes a Southern gambler comes there to make things lively, and sometimes he has to leave the town to save his life.

"Well, squire, how are ye gittin' along?" asked a rough-looking personage entering the office of the judge of police court.

"Oh, very poorly, Ruff."

"Why?"

"Don't get enough business."

"What, is the town so quiet?"

"Yes, haven't had but three fights in a week."

"Oh, shame," cried Ruff. Why that's a disgrace to mankind. What's the matter with Hornellsville?"

"I don't know," answered the justice, with a smile. "We don't get business enough for coffee money."

"Never mind, squire, I'll stir up some business for you," cried Ruff as he went out of the office.

Straight to a house where gambling was tolerated Ruff wended his way as if he was intent on keeping good his word.

"Anybody here who wants to fight?" asked Ruff.

"Hello, Ruff, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'."

"Why do you want to fight?"

"They are complainin' over there at the police court that they've got nothin' to do, and I want to give 'em somethin'," Ruff answered.

Two men were gambling at a table.

One was a tall dark-complexioned stranger, while the other was a young man with fair hair and blue eyes. At sight of the young man Ruff's eyes flashed with fire and all the evil in him rose to the surface.

"It's Paul Granger," he whispered through his teeth. "I'll kill him, curse him, I'll kill him. He stole from me the girl I would have won."

Granger looked up and at sight of Ruff his face turned pale.

"Are you ill?" asked the man with whom he was playing.

"No."

"But something is amiss. What is it?"

"I have an enemy here. He or I must die."

"What do you mean, Granger?"

"Ruff Parker who has just entered the saloon is my bitter sworn enemy. He has come to pick a quarrel with me, and a quarrel in Kentucky means death."

"What did you quarrel about?"

"The Blue Grass belle, Maud White, whom you saw to-day."

"Aye, you won her?"

"Yes, Mr. Moses, can't you help me?"

"Are you afraid to fight him?" answered Moses.

"No, but act as my second."

Moses rose to his feet.

"I'm a bad man," he thought. "I have defied death a thousand times, so what need I care. No, I'll do it."

He rushed past Ruff Parker, and as he did so, tread on his foot.

"Oh, ouch, ye fool!" yelled Parker, striking at Moses.

Moses expected this, and skillfully warding off the blow, planted an underhand stroke that sent Parker heels over head.

"A fight, a fight!" yelled everybody.

"Clear a ring!"

"Everybody clear a ring!"

"It's Ruff—duelin' is his forte."

"I dare him to a duel!" cried Moses, coolly folding his arms across his massive chest.

Ruff, who was getting upon his feet, was blind with rage at that challenge.

"Dare me!" roared Ruff.

"Yes."

"To fight you?"

"Yes."

"I'll do it."

"When?"

"Now. Sooner the better."

"I am ready."

"Name yer weapons."

"Pistols fifteen paces."

"Pistols be it then. Whar's yer second."

For answer the stranger pointed to Paul Granger.

"Mine is Joe Todd."

Todd came forward.

"Look here, Mr. Moses, you are a stranger, and this seems to be taking my quarrel on yourself."

"No it's not."

"He is a dead shot."

"Yes—hadn't you better recant?"

"Oh, no."

"But he is a sure shot."

"So you informed me, and I am very much obliged to you for it."

"Are you? Will you still persist in fighting?"

"Of course."

"Can't we prevent it?"

"No—please measure the ground, we have no time for delay."

"But I would rather you would let me fight."

"It's my quarrel," said Moses emphatically, "and I propose to settle it."

Seeing there was no way to settle the matter Granger and Todd went out to the wood on the north of Hornellsville, and measured the ground.

Pistols were produced.

Some one had a case of dueling pistols, and these were brought into requisition, and everything got ready.

The men took their places and weapons were put in their hands.

"Now, gentlemen," said Todd, "I'll count three and then say fire."

"All right."

"One."

The pistols were cocked.

"Two!"

They were raised.

"Three!"

They were aimed.

"Fire!"

Crack! Crack!

Two shots almost simultaneously rang out on the air.

One moment both men stood erect, and then Ruff Parker with a half muttered curse and groan fell shot through the head.

"Are you hurt?" asked Paul Granger, rushing to Moses.

"Not a scratch. Where is my horse?"

"There."

"I will mount and leave," he said, as he went toward his horse. "Come with me."

Granger accompanied him.

"It was all fair was it not?" asked Moses.

"Perfectly fair," Paul answered. "You have removed him from my path, and I thank you for it, Mr. Moses."

"Don't thank Moses."

"Why?"

"Thank Jesse James, for that is my true name," and with that the bandit king of the world leaped in the saddle and galloped away as rapidly as Siroc could carry him, which was, in fact, almost at the speed of the wind, while Paul Granger stood transfixed with amazement and awe.

"Jesse James," he gasped at last. "Can it be? Is he really Jesse James? And was my life

saved by the most noted bandit the world has ever seen?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HANDSAW.

SAY, mister, can you fasten my horse's shoe?"

"Guess so."

"At once?"

"Soon ez I file this handsaw."

"Handsaw be blamed. I want this shoe fixed."

The speaker dismounted from his horse in front of the roadside blacksmith shop and stamped on the ground in his impatience.

The begrimed blacksmith looked up from the handsaw which he was filing and said:

"Are ye in a hurry?"

"Yes."

"Good hoss?"

"Yes, but that shoe has lamed him."

"Guess it would."

Squeak, squeak, squeak, went the file against the old handsaw.

"Say, mister, I am in very much of a hurry. Can't you lay aside that handsaw and fix my shoe first?"

The blacksmith, with provoking coolness, touched the sharpened teeth of the saw with his thumb to test their edge, and squinting at the saw remarked:

"Bill Briggs wanted this handsaw before sundown."

"Well, can't you give me a new shoe and do it?"

"No, it'll take me till sundown to set and sharpen the saw."

"How much do you get for sharpening the handsaw?"

"Four bits."

In Kentucky and in fact nearly all the way through the South fifty cents is called four bits, and twenty-five cents two bits, six and a fourth cents a picayune, and in fact they have a standard measure of coin almost unknown in New York.

"I'll give you a dollar and a half to put on a new shoe," said the horseman. "Now that is three times as much as you will get for the handsaw."

"Reckin' tis."

"Why don't you do the job?"

The blacksmith, with his most provoking slowness, turned about and gazed at his forge, and remarked:

"Spect fire's all out."

"Kindle it."

The blacksmith yawned.

"Don't like ter disapp'int Bill Briggs, and I promised I'd hev his saw ready for him."

"I'll pay you enough to buy him a new handsaw," said the new comer, who was anxious to work up something like enthusiasm in the lazy smith.

"I say, mister, yer must be in er hurry," said the blacksmith.

"I am."

"Come fur?"

"Yes."

"Hoss shows it. Ben rid hard?"

"Will you please fix this shoe?"

"Wot's yer hurry?"

The horseman grew desperate.

"I have offered to pay you three times what your work is worth."

"I know it."

"Now I'll give you six times if you will hurry and not be so everlasting slow."

"I don't see any use a-hurryin'," said the blacksmith, rising slowly and yawning.

"I do."

"I don't."

"I want you to hurry."

"I won't."

"You will."

"Look hyar, stranger, whose shop is this?"

The smith had turned away to start the fire in his forge when he was stung to the quick by the imperative command, turned upon the stranger.

"Who runs this shop?" he demanded.

"You do. But I will run you."

"Yer will?"

"Yes."

"We'll see."

He seized the hand-saw he had been filing and raised it to strike down the stranger.

"Drop it!"

Like a flash there flew from under his coat the glittering barrel of a cocked revolver.

It was pointed right at his head.

"Oh, don't!"

"I will if you don't obey me."

"What yer want?"

"Drop that hand-saw."

He did so.
 "Now to the forge."
 "Yes, sir."
 "Stir up your fire."
 The blacksmith, still covered by the revolver, made a fire and began to blow his bellows.
 "Make a horseshoe."
 "Got 'em already made."
 "Well, put on the heels and toes and fit one on my horse the quickest you ever did a job in all your life."
 "Oh, dear me!"
 "You'll be a corpse if you are not brisk."
 "Please don't shoot."
 "Work faster."
 "I hate ter disappoint Bill about his saw."
 The stranger gazed down at the hand saw. It lay on the floor in the shop, and in his rage he seized it and broke it.
 "Great Scott! wot hev yer done?" roared the Kentucky blacksmith.
 "Broken the hand saw."
 "Wot did ye do that for?"
 "So it might not interfere with your work."
 "Wot'll I tell Bill?" asked the smith, gazing at the hand saw, while he hammered away at a shoe he was shaping for the foot of his odd customer's horse.
 "Tell him I broke it."
 "You?"
 "Yes."
 "Who are you?"
 "Jesse James."
 "Great Scott!"
 The blacksmith dropped the hammer, tongs and shoe upon the ground and gazed at the baudit king in amazement.
 "Pick them up."
 He did so without a murmur.
 The shoe was soon shaped and fitted to Siroc's foot.

Jesse then paid the smith for his services and asked:
 "How much is Bill's hand saw worth?"
 "Cost five dollars new."
 "It did?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, there is ten."
 And he handed him ten dollars in gold.
 "Now don't curse the hour Jesse James came to get his horse shod and broke your old hand-saw."
 "Gracious, sir! wish ye'd break every saw in the place!"
 A wild yell came from up the road.
 Jesse turned his eyes in that direction and said:
 "There comes Carl Greene and his gang! Come, Siroc, we've not a second to lose."
 Jesse James vaulted in the saddle and flew down the road.
 "Halt—halt—halt!"
 Jesse James turned and waved his hand defiantly at his enemy.
 A few shots rang out on the air, but the bullets whizzed harmlessly above the handit's head.
 He galloped over a hill and again lost his foes to view.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JESSE'S WIFE.

"WELL, Charley, we're here at last," said Bob Ford, as he and his brother alighted from the Hannibal and St. Joe train at St. Joseph, Mo.
 "Yes."
 "Where will we go?"
 "I am tired."
 "And I'm hungry."
 "There is a dining room in the depot, is there not?"
 "Yes."
 "Let's look in it."
 "Don't suppose any one will know us?"
 "No."
 The above conversation occurred at the Union Depot in St. Joseph, Mo. just one week after Carl Greene had given Jesse James a chase from the blacksmith shop in Kentucky.
 It was a bleak raw day in the month of February, 1882.
 As Bob and Charley were wending their way through the passenger rooms towards the dining apartment which is at the north end of the building, Bob suddenly clutched his brother's arm.
 "What's the matter, Bob?"
 "There he is, sure as the world."
 "Who?"
 "Hush, come this way."
 Bob led his brother away to a corner of the passenger room and said:
 "Didn't I tell you about him?"
 "Who?"
 "The detective!" whispered Bob.

"No."
 "Well, I will."
 Then he proceeded to tell Charley in as few words as possible how on the very night he and Jesse James set out for Kentucky with Dick Little he had rescued the stranger who proved to be none other than Carl Greene, Pinkerton's best detective.
 "And Charley, he will help us."
 "To what—to get our necks stretched?"
 "No, to vengeance."
 "Vengeance, how?"
 "He said he would help us; we want get rid of Jesse and at the same time save ourselves."
 "Can he do it?"
 "Yea."
 "I don't see how, since we are so completely identified with the James Boys."
 "Well, I will trust him. I have a notion to go and speak to him."
 "No, don't."
 "Why?"
 "If he wants to communicate with you, he'll do it. Besides, if you have any plans, you might ruin all of them by talking with him."
 "You are right, Charley. Your head's level."
 "It usually is."
 "I know it."
 "Let's go and get some dinner."
 They made their way to the dining-room and sat down to an excellent repast.
 They had almost finished and Bob was pushing back his plate to rise when a man at his elbow whom he had not noticed heretofore put a folded note before him and said:
 "Here is something you dropped, young man."
 "You must be mistaken."
 "No, I am not. It is yours. Take it."
 Bob now glanced at his neighbor and almost started from his chair in astonishment. His strange neighbor was none other than Carl Greene.
 Rising he walked away, followed by Charley.
 "Bob!"
 "Well?"
 "Was it he?"
 "Yes."
 "I thought so."
 "Glance at the note."
 Bob carefully opened the note, taking pains that no other eye save his own should see it.
 Then he read:
 "I want to meet you in two days at this table. Then I will tell you where we can have an interview."
 "Burn this letter."

Bob Ford folded the note, twisted it into a long strip, and walking to a great stove, in which was a roaring fire, he dropped it in on the glowing coals.
 Then he stood and watched it as it coiled and flamed with heat.
 "Let's go!" said Bob.
 "Where now?"
 "To find Jesse's wife."
 "You are going to stay there."
 "Of course we will."
 "Bob, it seems to me that we are doing a very mean trick."
 "What?"
 "Betraying a man who trusts us."
 "Yes, and were we doing it for money we would be villains. For no other offense committed could I stoop to this deed. I can forgive him enticing two innocent, trusting boys from the path of rectitude into a life of outlawry.
 "I can forgive him for every harsh word he has ever spoken to me, and for every wrong he has ever committed on me personally; but when I remember that Mollie Hayes by his wanton cruelty was driven to take her own life, then her blood cries out for vengeance, and Charley, there is nothing I will not stoop to, to gain it. I have sworn to be avenged and I will. It may seem harsh; it may seem like the work of a traitor, and the world will never adjudge us aright, but it must be done and I will do it by fair means if I can, by foul if I must."
 "Well, come with me, Bob."
 "You can find the house?"
 "Yes."
 A pretty little woman was arranging a neat, tidy little house on the hill above St. Joe.
 Everything denoted the good house wife and comfort.
 Two children were playing on the floor.
 There came a rap at the door.
 She opened it cautiously and saw two young men standing there.
 They were strangers to her and she was in the act of closing the door, when one of them said:

"This is Mrs. Jackson?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "I brought you something."
 He gave her a ring.
 "Where did you get it?" she asked.
 "He gave it to me."
 "Who?"
 Charley went closer and whispered:
 "Jesse James, your husband. He said for me to come to you with it and that he sent us here."
 "Who are you?"
 "The Ford Boys."
 "His best friends."
 "Yes."
 "I have heard him speak of you so often, which is Bob?"
 "I am."
 "Haven't you a present from him?"
 "Yes, a pistol."
 Then Bob produced a silver-mounted, ivory-handled revolver which Jesse James had given him. It was recognized at once by his wife, who said:
 "I know you both now. You are welcome."
 She shook their hands and asked when they had seen Jesse, and wanted to know how soon he would be home.
 Charley told her that he was coming from Kentucky on horseback.
 "And he rides Siroc?"
 "Yes."
 "Then unless he is chased by detectives from the route that is most direct he will be here soon, for Siroc is a swift-footed steed and will bring his master home very soon."

CHAPTER XXV.

GOING TO JEFFERSON CITY.

"CHARLEY?"
 "Well, Bob."
 "This is the day I am to meet Carl Green."
 "And you'll go?"
 "Yes."
 "What will I do?"
 "Stay here."
 "And let you go alone?"
 "Of course."
 "But can you trust him?"
 "Of course."
 "I am afraid of detectives."
 "But not of this one. Now do you fix up some excuse for me going away to tell Mrs. James."
 "I am looking for Jesse back at any moment. Unless detectives or old man Hite or some one turns him aside he will be home soon."
 "Make an excuse for me if he comes."
 "I'll do it."
 "And now I am gone."
 Bob wormed his way about through the city, and finally brought up at the Union depot. At noon he went in to get his lunch.
 He was eating leisurely, when an old woman who sat by his side handed him a letter and said in a thin, cracked voice:
 "I say, mister, yer dropped this."
 "Did I?"
 "Yes."
 "Are you sure it's mine?"
 "I know it air fur ye," she whispered in a wheezy, choking voice.
 Being thus addressed Bob Ford broke open the letter.
 It was brief.
 One line which read thus:
 "Follow this woman!"
 He looked at her and she nodded.
 Then she arose and he arose also.
 She went to a train that was going to Atchison, and got aboard.
 Bob went aboard, and in a few seconds they were whirling away towards Atchinson at a rate of speed that soon brought them to the town.
 They got out.
 She went down a street and he followed her.
 She turned into a small stone house and he accompanied her.
 She had a key and opened the door which admitted both.
 Turning into a small dark room the old woman closed the door behind them and in a voice quite altered and decidedly masculine she said:
 "Sit down, Bob Ford, we can talk here without any fear of interruption."
 Removing a wig and the dress the old woman was in a moment metamorphosed, and before Bob Ford stood Pinkerton's shrewdest detective, Carl Greene.
 "I am not surprised," Bob Ford coolly remarked.
 "I suppose you guessed me?"

"Yes, but your makeup was wonderful."
 "Now to business," said Carl Greene, drawing a chair up to Bob's side. "You want your revenge?"

"I do."
 "But you don't want to hang for it?"
 "No."

"I have tried every means for seven years to capture Jesse James alive. I can't do it. Pinkerton has lost fifty good men in the effort. The public doesn't know how many brave fellows have been shot down trying to arrest the chief of the bandit. Once Jesse James removed, the band will quickly go to pieces, for Frank has neither the courage nor the ability to hold it together."

"You are right, Mr. Greene."

"Now, I have arranged for you to go to Jefferson City and see the governor."

"The governor?"

"Yes."

"Why, he will hang me."

"No, he won't. No one but you, I and Governor Crittenden will know of your visit. You can there get official assurance of the pardon of yourself and brother, if you will bring in Jesse James."

"Dead or alive?"

"Yes, but alive if possible."

"That is impossible," Bob Ford answered.

"Perhaps it is."

"How will I go?"

"By rail, disguised as a woman. We will start to-morrow evening."

Then he gave Bob the number of a house at which he was to call at three next day, and Bob returned to St. Joseph.

He and Charley did not converse on the plan. There was danger of letting drop a word which would rouse the suspicions of the wife of the outlaw.

At the appointed hour next day Bob was at the house and entered it. He was met by an old woman who showed him to a room in which sat Carl Greene. As soon as they were alone the detective produced some disguises, and said: "Now we will get ready and go. You must be my daughter."

Bob smiled.

He was soon disguised as a woman. Carl Greene then made his disguise as an old man complete, and the two, with traveling bags and wraps, went to the depot and boarded a train for Jefferson City.

Governor Crittenden was sitting late in his office that night. He was a corpulent man with iron gray hair and a snow white mustache, a mild blue eye, and a face that was firm and fat.

All his attendants had been dismissed, and the governor, scratching his head, remarked:

"I guess Carl Greene's plans have miscarried."

There came a soft rap at the door.

The governor rose and opened it. Before him stood an old man and a veiled lady.

"Governor Crittenden, allow me to present Bob Ford of the James Boys band."

The veil was thrown aside, and the astonished governor saw that he was looking at a young man who was scarce more than a boy.

"Sit down."

They did so, and at once began to enter into negotiations. For more than two hours the three conversed in whispers, and then the governor and Bob rose to go.

Everything had been arranged, and Jesse James was doomed.

Only an opportunity was wanting.

At daylight next morning Bob Ford entered the little frame house on the hill known as the home of Mrs. Jackson.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEAD DETECTIVE.

CHARLEY FORD was almost dying with anxiety to know the result of his brother's visit.

He dared not by word or look evince his wish.

He and Bob held no secret conversation.

There was danger of being overheard.

It was the middle of the afternoon before Bob ventured over the hill to the great bluff above the river, and Charley followed him.

Then he told all.

It was far better than Charley had expected.

They went back to the house.

It was growing late. Already the lights in the city below shone on the streets.

There came the tramp of hoofs up the hill and two men drew rein.

Mrs. James was at the door hoping to meet her husband.

It was Jesse, but she dared not by word or look indicate who he was.

"You have come."

"Yes—I want two men who are here."

"Here we are," said Bob.

"There are horses in the barn, mount and follow us, we have work to do."

The Ford Boys exchanged glances but said nothing.

There was nothing to do but to obey, and they went to the barn, saddled the horses, and prepared to follow.

In meanwhile Jesse James was in the house with his wife and children.

For a desperate wild outlaw Jesse was a singularly domestic man. He loved his home, and the brief days spent with his family were like green oases in his almost desert life.

"Come on!" he cried.

Siroc stood stamping the earth with his iron-shod hoof.

Jesse vaulted in the saddle.

Never did man more resemble a knight of old than the bandit as he thundered down the stony hill, his followers at his heels.

The Ford Boys soon made out the second man to be Frank James.

"What is to be done now, Jesse?" Bob Ford asked.

"A detective is shadowing us."

"A detective!" gasped Bob in real alarm, for he feared that Carl Greene was carrying his part too far.

"Yes."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"What is his name?"

"Hart. Clarence Hart."

"One of Pinkerton's men?"

"No. He is one of the western detective agencies."

"What is your plan?"

Jesse was silent for a moment and then said:

"Bob, I don't usually give my plans away to any one, but I have no hesitancy about telling you. You are one of the band whom I know I can trust—yes, even with my life."

"Do you put such confidence in me?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"I am glad of it."

"I know I can depend on your good judgment, and I know I can trust to your friendship."

Bob Ford felt a slight twinge of conscience, but then the recollection of the Hayes affair steeled his heart, and setting his teeth, he thought:

"I will do it, be it ever so mean and treacherous. He had no mercy on them, nor on me. I was powerless."

"Well, Bob, I'll tell you."

"Do so."

"That fellow will follow us into the wood northeast of the city, and there we will halt and kill him."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Won't it be dangerous?"

"Not so dangerous as to have him living."

"But the finding of the dead body of a detective on the road?"

"It will not be found."

They galloped along the road passing the extension of what is now the electric street railway and the Park which is such a place of public resort in the summer season.

In the neighborhood of Vanscoicks farm, about six miles from the city, Jesse and his men came to a halt.

"Now he'll be along soon?" said Jesse.

"Do you suppose he will follow us?"

"Yes."

"He may not."

"Oh, I know a green detective too well."

"Then he is a green one?"

"Green as a gourd."

"And will be trapped like a beaver," Frank burst in, with a laugh.

"There is no need then of all four of us if he is so childlike," responded Bob.

"Oh, no, but it is always best when the house is shadowed to get all away."

"He was shadowing the house."

"Yes."

"Well, it was Charley and I he was shadowing."

"Of course."

"And we never knew it."

"You have much to learn, Bob."

"I know it."

And Bob thought:

"You have much to learn also, Jesse James."

Jesse James was right in his predictions.

In a few moments the tramp of feet could be heard.

Then Jesse made a sudden and wonderful change.

His coat was turned—it having two sides, one black and one gray. His hat was changed for a farmer's hat.

Some false whiskers and a wig completed his disguise, making everything complete, and his own men would not have known him had they not seen the wonderful transformation.

When this was all completed, he mounted his horse, and bidding the others stay where they were, rode out to meet the horseman.

"How will he know that he has met the detective?" Bob Ford asked himself.

They were in a thicket near enough to hear all that Jesse said.

"Hello!" cried the horseman at meeting the supposed farmer.

"Howdy do, stranger? Out rather late bean't yer?"

"Yes, old man. Have you seen any one lately?"

"Yes."

"On horseback?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Four men."

"Four men! Those are the very men I am after."

"Who are they?"

"Oh, they are men I want."

"Hoss thieves?"

"Yes, and worse."

"Good land, inister, wot kin be wuss?"

"Train robbers and murderers are worse, are they not?"

"Yer don't mean the Jeems Boys?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good land—then yer must be a detective."

"I am."

"Huntin' the James Boys?"

"Yes."

Crack!

The report was not very loud. There was a frightened plunging of a horse as something fell at the roadside.

"Woa, sir. Stand still. Come here, Frank."

A moment later Frank James had seized the detective's horse and was patting the dead man across it.

"What are you going to do with him, Jess?"

"Take him to the well at the roadside and drop him in."

Bob and Charley now joined the James Boys and the four rode to the well at the roadside where the body was dropped in and then they galloped away.

Jesse and Frank, Bob and Charley were silent for a long time.

Then Bob asked:

"Are you going back to St. Joseph?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We dare not just yet."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

THE day was just beginning to dawn as four horsemen entered a little town called Garlock.

Their horses were almost white with foam.

"It has been a hard night, Bob," said one.

"It has, Jesse."

"They pressed us close."

"Who was it?"

"In the lead?"

"Yes."

"Timberlake?"

"The sheriff?"

"Yes, and my evil genius."

"He is very determined."

"He is, and I will yet be the death of him."

"What are you going to do, Jesse?"

"Stop awhile, Frank."

Jesse James dismounted in front of a house which stood at one side of the street.

It was a two story frame building, and had the appearance of a dwelling.

There was no fence about it nor porch in front of the door.

Jesse rapped on the door with his knuckle.

"Wake up, Bob Nelson!"

There was no answer.

Then he struck with his fist.

A window above opened and a voice said:

"What d'ye want?"

"Bob Nelson?"

"Yes."

"Come down here."

"Who are you?"

"You will know me when you come."

"Oh, yes, I recognize you. How are you J—?"

"Never mind how I am. Come down at once."

"Yes, I will."
In a few moments the front door was opened.
"What's the matter?"
"Bob, we are hard pressed."
"Hard pressed?"
"Yes. All right Timberlake has chased us. Our horses are run down and we are worn out. We want you to help us."
"How can I?"
"Give us shelter until night then we will go to Clay county."

"This house is all I've got."
"Well, we can stay in it."
"But your horses?"
"Bring them with us."
"In the house?"
"Yes."
"Can you?"
"Of course. The door is wide enough. We can sleep up-stairs and leave the horses below."
"All right."

It will be some moments until daylight, and you can slip out and get hay to cover the floor of your house and deaden the stamping.

Bob Nelson was under many obligations to the James Boys, and now that they were in need of aid he dare not refuse them.

He hurried to comply with their request, and the horses were taken in the house. Here they were fed and at dawn of day all save Jesse James who remained up as guard were sleeping.

The sun rose.

The day was fair and the dull little village awoke from its drowsiness. There was a blacksmith shop across the way, and the ring of a hammer could occasionally be heard.

A merchant was handling some goods on his counters.

Jesse watched everything from behind the curtains of the window.

No one came to the house of Bob Nelson's which stood a little apart from the others.

Suddenly there came a roar of hoofs as a party of horsemen came across a bridge that spanned a creek called Shut Eye.

"Ah, ha, they are coming now," thought Jesse, as he drew the curtains a little closer and with cocked revolver watched them.

In a few moments there came a party of horsemen up the hill.

"There is Timberlake," Jesse whispered.

Frank James was up in a moment.

"Sh—no noise!" whispered Jesse.

Frank peeped from the window.

"They have come."

"Yes."

Frank tightened his belt about his waist.

"Hadh't we better awake the others?"

"Yes."

"Bob!"

"Charley!"

They called softly.

"What is it, Bob?"

"Whist, not so loud."

Both the Ford Boys were now awake.

"Are we attacked?" asked Bob.

"No."

"What's the matter?"

"Just take a peep out of this window."

"It's our pursuers," Bob answered, after getting a glimpse of them.

"Yes."

"I wish we were out of town."

"Listen. Timberlake is talking with the blacksmith."

The blacksmith had come to the door of his shop and hitching up his trousers and tightening his leathern apron about his waist, asked:

"What's the matter?"

"Have you seen any horsemen go past here?"

"No."

"In the night?"

"I didn't. I was asleep like all Christian people ought to be last night."

Timberlake with a laugh answered:

"And all Christian people would be if it wasn't that some of them have to hunt down the unchristian train robbers."

"What d'ye mean. Are there another train robbery?"

"No."

"Then wot yer talking about?"

"We are on the trail of the James Boys and have traced them to this village."

"Oh, they mought a rode through in the night, mister. I don't say they didn't. We are all honest people here and work hard and sleep sound."

Timberlake next applied to the merchant, but he knew no more than the blacksmith.

After making several inquiries, Timberlake and his men drew rein directly under the window where the James Boys were and began to scuss matters.

"It's very clear they have gone through the town. Let's follow," he said.

Then the cavalcade galloped away down the road and were soon lost to view.

"It was a close shave," said Jesse James.

The day passed, and the sun was low in the western horizon.

Suddenly there came a clatter of hoofs.

"They are coming back. They are coming here!" cried Bob Ford.

"They are in the old house!" cried Timberlake, galloping up at the head of a score of horsemen, and pointing to the house.

"Surrender!"

"Bang!" went a gun, and the bullet struck the house.

"Up at them!" cried Jesse.

Then began a fierce conflict.

From the upper windows of the house the James Boys poured a steady fire on the sheriff and his posse.

"Down with the door!" roared Timberlake.

The village was now wild with excitement.

Men were arming themselves and coming to the fight.

At the cry of down with the door, a dozen men seized a great log of wood.

"They are going to batter in the door!" cried Jesse James. "Now prepare for the last struggle."

"Jesse?"

"What, Frank?"

"Let's mount our horses. The door will be high enough for us to ride out of, and when it is down we will leap out among them on horse back, and it will astonish them."

"Yes. We'll do it."

Then every man went below, mounted his trembling horse, and waited for the last struggle.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT ST. JOSEPH.

"ARE all ready?" asked Jesse James.

A moment's silence.

"Yes."

The answer came like the burst of a thundercloud.

"When I give the word to charge come after me."

They could hear the men dragging the great log toward the door.

"Now, about twenty of you take it!" cried the voice of Timberlake, who could be plainly heard by those within.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Raise it above your heads and dashed it against the door."

"Oh, what am I to do?" cried the owner of the house, running down to where the James Boys and Ford Brothers sat on their horses in the front room, ready to charge like a thunderbolt through the crowd.

"Swear we intimidated you, idiot!" cried Jesse James.

"Why not tie and gag me?"

Jesse laughed.

He leaped from Siroc, and in a moment had tied his friend to one of the posts of the stairway, and bound a handkerchief over his mouth.

When this was done he again leaped on his horse.

Not a moment too soon, either, for—

"Crash!" came the log on the heavy door.

"Steady, all."

"Crash."

"It can't stand many of those, boys."

"Crash!"

"What a stout old door it is. It is of solid oak."

"Yes," Frank answered, "but see, the hinges are loosened. Another blow and down she comes."

Frank James had scarce ceased speaking when there came a thundering crash, and the door burst from its hinges and fell at the feet of Siroc.

Scarce had it touched the floor when Jesse James cried:

"Charge all!"

Then, like a thunderbolt, Siroc leaped through the open door, his master on his back, right in the midst of the astounded belligerents.

The spectacle of a man suddenly bursting among them, mounted on a black horse, with the rein in his teeth and a revolver in each hand, firing right and left, was a sight well calculated to alarm any one.

The sharp crack of pistol shots caused the men to fall back in dismay.

Then another, another, and still another horsemen, like powerful meteors, sprang from the house, and ere the crowd of besiegers could gather up their scattered faculties, all four were galloping away at the top of their speed.

"Look out!" yelled Timberlake. "Don't let them escape."

"Who are they?" asked one fellow, gazing through the dust and smoke.

He had been ridden down by one of the flying horsemen, and could hardly comprehend what had happened, but was rather under the impression that the house had fallen down upon him.

"What was it? What's happened?"

"There goes Jesse James riding away after him," roared Timberlake.

The big sheriff went to his horse, vaulted in the saddle and galloped away as speedily as he could, shouting:

"Come on, come on."

Ere many minutes, half a score of men were thundering away in his wake, trying to come up with the angry sheriff, who was enraged at the escape of the banditti.

But Jesse James and his companions were now mounted on fresh horses, while the animals of Timberlake and his men were badly blown.

For three or four minutes the four fugitives thundered over the ground at break-neck speed. Jesse asked:

"How are you all? Any one hit?"

"No," answered Bob.

"Bob—how is your horse?"

"Fresh as a daisy."

"Did we hit any of them?"

"Can't say, Jesse; we got through too quick."

"Who brought up in the rear?"

"I did," Frank answered.

"Did you see any go down?"

"Two on three were on the ground, but whether shot down or knocked down I can't say."

"I guess they have been taught a lesson by this; not to try to hem us in."

"It was a close shave though, Jesse," said Bob.

"Yes, rather."

"What are you going to do?"

Jesse was thoughtful for a moment, and answered:

"I believe we will go back to St. Joe."

"Will you be safe?" Frank asked.

"Yes—everybody there thinks I am Mr. Jackson, the horse trader."

"But a detective did shadow the house."

"It was for Bob and Charley. He had no thought of me being there."

"I guess you are right, but he is out of the way," said Frank.

"Oh, yes, he will never bother us any more. By the way, Frank, where are you going?"

"Home."

"To your wife?"

"Yes."

"Annie will be glad to see you. I am going home also. We will have a long season of rest and then we will go to Plattsburg."

"Is that the object of our next raid, Jesse?"

"Yes, we will go to Plattsburg and we will make it remember our visit."

"The bank I suppose will be gutted?"

"All of them."

"All! how many banks are in Plattsburg?" Bob asked.

"Three," Jesse answered. "There is a murder trial in Plattsburg some time in June, I think the ninth. On that day I intend to muster every man of the band. We will divide into four parties. I will command one, and rob the First National. At the same time Frank will rob the Savings Bank with four men and Jim Cummins with four men will rob another, the Citizens Bank. Charley and Bob with six men, can be keeping the streets quiet and holding everything in reserve."

"That's an excellent plan," said Frank James.

"But it will never be carried out," thought Bob Ford. "Long before the time arrives I will have wreaked my vengeance on Jesse James. Mollie Hayes can sleep quietly in her grave when she knows she has been avenged."

They traveled until nearly dawn, when all signs of pursuit being over they separated.

Frank going toward Clay county, where his wife and children were, and Jesse and the Ford Boys going toward St. Joseph, Missouri.

They saw no signs of Timberlake, and all heavily disguised they entered St. Joseph's and went to Jesse James' house.

The bandit king's time was short.

He little dreamed that he had ridden the last raid, and that ere many weeks the foul crimes done in his days of nature would be avenged by one whom he thought to be his best friend. The very pistol which he had given Bob Ford was to be turned against him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

VENGEANCE AT LAST.

It was a bright spring morning. Birds sang sweetly in the trees, and flowers bloomed in the garden.

All nature seemed gay and glad.

St. Joseph lay like a busy hive of humanity below the bluff and people were hurrying about their business affairs all unconscious that there lived within the incorporate limit of the city the chief of the greatest banditti the world has ever known.

Jesse had been down to town.

He returned to find the Ford Boys in the front room of the house.

"Well, boys, I guess all goes well," said Jesse.

"Yes. There is no indication of anything alarming, is there?" Bob asked.

"No."

"No one dreams who we are?"

"Oh, no," answered Jesse with a laugh.

"How soon will the men begin to gather for Plattsburg?"

"Next week."

"It will be a great job."

"The biggest thing ever undertaken by any band."

"I suppose you will try St. Joe next?"

"Ha, ha, ha, we may!"

"Then St. Louis, Chicago and New York."

"We don't dare get so far away from Clay County," answered Jesse, with a smile. "We must keep our eyes on it, you know, for in Clay County is safety."

All three laughed at this.

"Well, boys, come let's go and look after the horses. I see my wife is house cleaning to-day."

"Yes."

"When I come back I will help her."

As they went out of the door Jesse paused to speak with his wife a moment and Bob and Charley Ford went on to the barn.

"Charley, I am going to do it."

"When?"

"To-day."

"To-day?"

"Yes, this morning."

"Why not now?"

"We can't."

"Stand by the door with your pistol, and as he steps out shoot him down."

"No, Charley, we can't. He's got his revolvers, and I know Jesse too well for that. He is as quick as lightning. We must get his pistols away from him."

"How can we?"

"I don't know."

"We can't. Jesse never allows his revolvers to be an inch from him."

"We have got to do it some way."

"Will we be pardoned?"

"Yes."

"No doubt of it?"

"Not the least."

"Then the sooner it's done the better. I intend to kill him if I have to do it right in the presence of his wife and children."

Jesse came from the house and the three went to the barn.

Siroc whinnied at sight of his master, and seized his coat-sleeve as if to try to hold him.

"What ails you, Siroc?"

The horse stamped in his stall angrily and impatiently.

As the Ford Boys came near him, he evinced his displeasure by squeals and angry kicks.

"What ails the beast?" Bob asked.

"I don't know, Bob, he is mad with you."

Siroc fondled his master, and put his head on his shoulder as if he would hold him.

"There, there, poor fellow, what is the matter with you this morning? You don't seem to want me to go away."

Charley and Bob Ford exchanged glances, and when they were in another part of the barn, Charley whispered:

"Some horses know more than men."

"Can it be that the horse reads our thoughts?"

Bob said, in a whisper.

"He seems to."

They had completed the currying, which took considerable time, for Jesse James was one of the most careful groomsmen the world has ever seen.

"Now, Siroc, old fellow, we will soon be on the road again. I feel sorry for you, cooped up as you are in the stable. You long to be away, and so do I."

Then he put up the currycomb, threw a little more hay into Siroc's manger, and started toward the house.

Siroc looked after him, whinnied, and tried to coax him back.

"What ails you, my gallant steed? You don't seem to want me to leave you."

"He is very much attached to you, Jesse," said Bob in a cool unconcerned manner.

"Yes."

"He is a noble horse."

"Not a better."

"How old is he?"

"Can't say exactly. About eight I should think."

"You have rode many horses in your time?"

"Yes, but never yet saw Siroc's equal. He can carry off the tallest gate on the turnpike."

"Can he?"

"Yes. Come, boys, now let us go to the house. We have fed and cared for the horses, and there is no more here now that needs our attention."

"No."

The three went quietly toward the house, talking, laughing and jesting.

"I think, boys, that we will work in that garden for a few days, and we can make it very profitable and pleasant."

"Yes, we can."

"See, my wife has some young chickens," said Jesse pointing to some hens with their broods of young chickens which were running about in the yard. "She is an excellent wife and so domestic."

All this must have wrung the heart of Bob Ford.

They entered the house. The day was very warm, and Jesse, whose face was reeking with perspiration, said:

"It is too warm for a coat—I must take mine off."

Pulling off his coat he laid it on the bed.

Bob Ford noted the act. For weeks he had noted Jesse's every movement, and waited like a bloodhound ready to leap at him the moment the opportunity came.

Jesse wore a brace of revolvers and a big knife buckled about his waist.

"Jesse, if anybody should pass and see you with those revolvers buckled about your waist they might think it a little strange."

"That's so," said Jesse with a smile. "Let me take them off."

Then he unbuckled his pistols and laid them on the table.

He wiped his face with his handkerchief and

[THE END.]

sat down with his back to the bed and his face toward the Ford Boys.

The supreme moment had not arrived, but it was coming.

Bob felt his blood racing through his veins like the current of a mill race. His heart throbbed wildly, and he could scarce breathe regularly.

Jesse looked about the room and said:

"I must help my wife clean up a little."

Seizing a dust-brush which was near, he stepped upon a chair to dust a picture which hung upon the wall.

Now the time had come.

Both Bob and Charley Ford started to their feet. Bob's hand drew the very silver-mounted pistol, a number thirty-eight caliber, which Jesse James had given him.

Stepping behind the bandit, he by one swift motion brought the muzzle to the back of his head and fired.

The bandit king heard the motion, knew his danger, and had wheeled part of the way around, when he felt the ball crash through his brain.

Without a cry or a groan he fell back upon the floor, gasping and dying.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

"MOLLIE HAYES, you are avenged!" cried Bob Ford, as he gazed on the dying bandit.

Jesse James was not quite dead. He was struggling and gasping, and had started up to his elbow.

"He'll get up, Bob, and shoot us yet," cried Charley.

Bob then sprang at him and struck him a blow on the head with the butt of his pistol, and Jesse James fell back to the floor.

"What is it—oh, what is it?" cried the bandit king's wife, rushing out from another room.

Seeing her husband lying on the floor and Bob Ford standing near with a revolver in his hand, she cried:

"You have done it—you have done it! Oh, you coward—you murderer! Jesse—Jesse, speak to me!" she cried, raising the head of the dying man in her arms and trying to stop the blood which flowed from his forehead, where Bob had struck him with the butt of his pistol. "Speak to me—just one word to tell me you know me! Oh, he can't speak—he is dying! Jesse—Jesse—Jesse!"

It was all over. He was gone.

His dark soul had flown from the body to give an account of the deeds done in the body.

Siroc waited and whinnied in vain for his master. No more would the bandit king mount him and dart down the road.

Mrs. James was stricken with grief.

The news of the shooting was telegraphed far and wide. Bob and Charley Ford were arrested, and on being arraigned plead guilty under advice of their attorney, but were pardoned by the governor.

Quite a concourse of people from Crackerneck came to Jesse James' funeral, and Clay county has many citizens who mourn him yet.

Bob and Charley Ford received their reward for killing Jesse James.

Charley committed suicide, because Jim Cummins and some of the others of the band, who have never surrendered, pursued him to kill him. Bob Ford still lives, and when he feels any compunctions of conscience at the deed remembers Mollie Hayes, and say:

"I have had my vengeance."

D. W. STEVENS, the author of this story, is also the author of the following stories published in THE NEW YORK DETECTIVE LIBRARY: No. 436, "The Younger Boys' Flight; or, Chased From the Lakes to the Gulf." No. 433, "After the James Boys; or, Chased Through Three States by Day and by Night." No. 430, "The James Boys in Court and the James Boys' Longest Chase." No. 428, "The James Boys at Bay; or, Sheriff Timberlake's Triumph." No. 426, "The James Boys Cave, and the James Boys as Train Wreckers." No. 425, "Thirty Days With the James Boys; or, A Detective's Wild Chase in Kentucky." No. 421, "The James Boys Afloat; or, The Wild Adventures of a Detective on the Mississippi." No. 419, "The James Boys in Mexico and the James Boys in California." No. 413, "The James Boys Tricked; or, A Detective's Cunning Game." No. 412, "The Younger Boys; or, The Fiends of the Border." No. 410, "The James Boys Captured; or, A Young Detective's Thrilling Chase." No. 409, "The Last of the Band; or, The Surrender of Frank James." No. 404, "Jesse James' Last Shot; or, Tracked by the Ford Boys."

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